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OR,

The Recreants of the Red River.

A TALE OF THE WILD SOUTH-
WESTERN REGION.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,
AUTHOR OF "THE MAN FROM TEXAS," "OVER-
LAND KIT," "INJUN DICK," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE OUTLAWS' RETREAT.

A SOLITARY cabin, situated in the heart of a dense swamp, the head-waters of Turkey Creek, which runs into the great Red River in the extreme southwestern part of the State of Arkansas.

Look upon any ordinary map of the State, though, and you will search in vain for Turkey Creek, although the Red River and its branches, both great and small, are nearly all given.

That is because Turkey Creek—or "Crick," to use the vernacular of the natives of the South-western region—is such an extremely small and insignificant stream that the scientific men who

"HAVE YOU COUNTED ME IN, FOR I'M PLAYING A LONE HAND IN THIS GAME?"

get up the maps did not consider it worth noticing.

The creek was only about a mile long, running from Smackover Bayou, which it drained, to the river, and even at its mouth, which was so hidden by bushes as not to be visible except on close inspection, it was only some fifteen feet wide.

It was a deep stream, though, and always had a couple of feet of water in it even in the droughty summer season, when the majority of the little streams of the region dry up and disappear.

Smackover Bayou was a pretty big "marsh," though, as an Arkansas man would say, being about five miles wide by ten long.

It was a tangled wilderness, where all sorts of wild birds and beasts, common to the locality, found a home.

The solitary hut which we have set out to describe was situated about half a mile from where the creek emptied into the river. At this point the stream was wide and shallow, with a multitude of islands, all covered with a dense growth of timber, and situated so closely together that it was possible for an expert woodman, acquainted with the ground, to make his way across the stream simply by passing from island to island by the aid of the fallen trees, laid low by the force of the tempest, which at certain seasons of the year sweep through this region with almost as much force as a tropical hurricane.

About in the middle of the stream, on one of the largest of the islands, the lonely cabin was situated.

This particular island—only about a hundred feet long by fifty wide—was so heavily wooded that not until the explorer almost stepped foot upon it was it perceptible that beneath the trees, and bushes, and running vines, was there solid ground, for until an inspection was made it seemed as though the vegetation grew right out of the water.

And the cabin which was a small one story structure, built out of hewn logs, after the fashion common to the southwestern wilderness, being situated in the middle of the island, completely hidden by trees, would only be apt to be found by those acquainted with the fact of its existence, for no stranger would ever think of looking for a human habitation in such a desolate spot.

A few years before the time of which we write;—ten years after the close of the rebellion—such a hut, in such a place, would be likely to have but one kind of a tenant—a fugitive slave, seeking concealment in the morass from the vengeance of a cruel master.

The crushing out of slavery by the victorious North had put a stop to all this sort of thing, and the hiding-places of the runaway blacks are no longer to be stumbled upon in the southern wilderness.

Such a cabin, so carefully hidden away, was evidently the abiding-place of some man who was anxious to seclude himself from the world, who did not court society.

A recluse, or an outlaw—the latter far more probable than the first.

And a wilder and more desolate spot for a man with a price upon his head to take refuge could hardly be found in the whole state of Arkansas.

Yet convenient too to the haunts of civilized man, for only three miles down the river, on the opposite bank, was the thriving town of Blazing Star, an old settlement, which hadn't amounted to much before the war, but since that time it had taken a new lease of life, and was forging ahead more rapidly than any place on the river above Fulton.

Now, gentle reader, if you are not acquainted with what goes to make up a thriving town in the Southwest, do not picture in your mind's eye a village of a thousand or two inhabitants, for Blazing Star could only boast of some two hundred souls all told, but a "city" of this size amounts to something in the wild country of which we write, and Blazing Star proudly arrogated to itself metropolitan airs on account of being a trifle ahead in population of Rocky Comfort, its rival, and beating the county seat, Richmond, by fully fifty people.

But enough of this prelude, and come we at once to our story.

It was a dark and dismal day.

The rain had been steadily falling for hours and it came down in that vigorous manner characteristic of the South where it often rains for three or four days at a time without holding up in the least.

Within the cabin sat two men, both rough-looking fellows with the visible stamp of ruffian and desperado plainly imprinted upon their features.

One, who sat by the log fire, blazing in the wide fireplace, attending to the frying of some small catfish, the product evidently of the neighboring waters, was a tall, muscularly-built fellow with a short, black beard and closely cropped hair of the same hue.

He had a face as hard in its lines as though it had been carved out of a pine-knot.

His companion was a decided contrast, being rather undersized in stature, and not particularly muscularly built, although evidently strong

and wiry after the fashion of one of the cat tribe.

He was a sallow-faced, yellow-skinned man with thin tow-colored hair and a scraggy beard of the same hue, gray eyes with a decided greenish cast, deep-sunken in the head, and in their appearance almost as much resembling the eyes of an animal as those of a man.

Neither one of these men would have been apt to inspire a timid traveler with confidence if they had been encountered in a solitary place.

The pair did not belie their looks, for two greater scoundrels it would have been hard to find in all the wild and lawless Southwestern region.

And, strange as it may appear, the second scoundrel, despite the fact that he was hardly half the size of the other, was the master-spirit of the two.

But in brains he made up for what he lacked in strength.

His companion possessed the brute force, but he had neither the cunning nor the courage of the other.

Men of wide reputations—such as it was—were the pair, and, ever since the close of the war, they and the representatives of the law in the towns along the river had not been on good terms.

The pair had been members of one of the numerous guerrilla bands which infested the Southwest during the closing years of the Rebellion, but there were plenty of good Southerners who did not hesitate to say that such soldiers as these ruffians did more harm than good to the Southern cause, for they were more expert as robbers than warriors.

Be that as it may, there wasn't the least doubt that since the war they had been virtually outcasts and outlaws.

Their hands had been against every man and every man's hand had been against them.

Yet, so strangely do they manage matters in this wild Southwestern country, although the pair had been proclaimed outlaws and it was consequently the duty of all good citizens to arrest them on sight, yet they did not hesitate, when the humor seized them, to make their appearance openly in the streets of the towns in the neighborhood of the bayou where they were supposed to have their hiding-place, and no one ever attempted to trouble them.

In fact, they were greeted just about as cordially as though they had been the most reputable of citizens.

Possibly this was owing to the fact that they were armed to the teeth, and it was well known if they were attacked they would fight to the death.

And, of course, the way this world goes what is everybody's business is nobody's.

Every man, who cared to talk about the matter at all, said that somebody ought to arrest the "infernal scoundrels," but was careful not to volunteer to do the job himself.

The names that the pair bore amply testified in regard to what kind of men they were.

The leader had been christened Jackson Smackover, coming from one of the old Arkansas families, but this had been changed to Wildcat Jack, on account of his resemblance to that ferocious animal.

His companion, William Corkinham by name, sunk that appellation in the evil-sounding one of Big Black Bill.

And, strange to relate, both of the men were proud of their nick-names, so suggestive of violence and blood.

And the pair openly boasted that when their time came it was their desire to die "with their boots on," the frontier way of expressing a death by violence.

CHAPTER II.

THE DUG-OUT.

As we have said, Big Black Bill was busily engaged in attending to the frying of the fish, while his companion reclining on a rude bunk in the corner—made by spreading some skins and a blanket over some young and tender pine boughs—was smoking a corn-cob pipe.

Both of the outlaws were dressed in the butternut-colored, homespun suits common to the dweller in this section, only wearing the coats however in bad weather, the red flannel shirts which they wore being considered ample protection otherwise.

The outlaws were well-armed, a pair of revolvers being belted to their waists, and in the stout leather belts, which supported the revolver holsters, "eight-inch" bowie-knives were thrust.

Suspended on some wooden pegs, driven into the logs which formed the walls of the cabin, were a pair of double-barreled shot-guns, the favorite weapon of these Southwestern border men, and one answerable for many a bloody deed.

"Still raining, hain't it!" observed Wildcat Jack, abruptly.

"Oh, yes, coming right down."

"This is the third day too."

"The third day," repeated Big Black Bill who was not much gifted in the conversational line.

"Mebbe it will rain a week."

"Mebbe it will."

"And while the rain keeps on I s'pose it ain't of much use fur to expect ovr men to come."

"No, no, not much use. They ain't used to all sorts of weather like we-uns."

"Supplies are pretty nearly out too, hain't they?" queried Wildcat Jack, looking around him in an ugly sort of way.

"'Bout gone."

"What have we got on hand?"

"Only a junk of salt pork—a pound or two mebbe."

"Any fire-water?"

"Wot do ye want to ax that fur?" growled the big fellow in a disconsolate way.

"Didn't you go and make an end of ther whisky this morning without as much as giving me a smell of it?"

"Oh, well, if a smell is all you want, you can get that by taking a sniff at the empty jug," responded the outlaw, with a grin.

"Wa-al, I should reckon from the way I saw you pulling at the jug when I came in that thar wasn't even a smell left," the other rejoined.

"Lemme see," remarked Wildcat Jack, in a reflective sort of way. "Thar's some of the hoe-cakes left?"

"Yes; a couple."

"With them and the catfish we kin make a dinner all right."

"Yes, but we ought to have a leetle whisky to wash it down."

"We can't have what we ain't got," retorted the other, decidedly.

"Oh, come now, tell me something that I don't know."

"But I say, old man, when we get rid of this fodder, what are we going to do for more? Two healthy galoots like we-uns can't live on wind, you know. "We have got to have something a good deal more solid."

"Well, if our men don't come within an hour arter we git rid of the fodder, we must go up to Blazing Star and have a talk with them, that's all."

"I sent 'em word that we had run out of money, and that our victuals were played out, and allowed we would like to see them as soon as possible, for we thought it was time to take a trick somewhere."

"An' neither one on 'em has come near," growled the big ruffian in an aggrieved sort of way.

"That's so; one thing we must remember, though, is that the storm has been a tough one, and mebbe they are waiting for it to hold up a bit."

"Yes, but neither one on the two is either salt nor sugar, and a leetle bit of rain wouldn't hurt 'em much."

"Yes, but they ain't the kind of cattle to rough it if it can be helped, and as I s'pose they don't think we are in any particular hurry, they have allowed they had better wait till the rain stops."

"I reckon that if they were in our fix, fodder played out and nary whisky in the jug, they wouldn't take it so durned easy," growled Big Black Bill.

"Ah! take it easy, old man," counseled the other.

"Thar ain't the least bit of use of kickin' up a row about it."

"Both on 'em are pretty decent fellers, and thar's no mistaking that they have put some good jobs in our way."

"Yes, but they were durned keeful fur to take their whack out, and a mighty good one, too, when you consider that you and me did half of the work."

"Yes, but they planned the jobs, you know, and if it hadn't been fur them putting us up to the tricks, we wouldn't have got anything at all."

"It's jist the same as in the old time in the army, Bill—the common soldiers do the fighting, and the ginerals git all the glory."

"That is the way of the world all over."

"The men who have got the brains are gwine to take the lion's share, every time, and you kin bet all you are worth on it too."

Just at this point the low growl of a dog, who had found shelter from the rain in a hole which he had dug in the soft soil under one corner of the house, attracted the attention of the two.

The dog was an ill-looking, lanky, yellow cur, who seemed to be half-starved, but for all his ill-looks the brute was fairly worth his weight in gold to Wildcat Jack, to whom he belonged, for a better watch-dog existed not in all Arkansas, and then, just as if he understood that it was only necessary for him to warn his master that some one was coming, and that it was not prudent by loudly barking to allow the newcomers to know that he was in the neighborhood, the dog always conveyed the intimation of the approach of strangers in the most careful manner.

And then in addition to being such an excellent watch-dog, the animal was capital on coons and had pluck enough to attack a bear.

"Aha! do you hear that?" exclaimed Wildcat Jack as he rose to his feet and approached the door.

"It is big odds that our men are coming."

"Mebbe some marshal or sheriff who would like the pleasure of our company," observed Black Bill with a glance at the double-barreled shot guns upon the wall.

"Oh, no, there ain't any bit of danger of that," responded Wildcat Jack confidently.

"Tair ain't been anybody a-running us lately, and we have too many good friends in the towns 'round about for them to allow anybody to spring a trap upon us without warning."

"You kin depend upon it that it is our men."

Then Wildcat Jack opened the door and listened for a moment.

The dog stopped his growling the moment his master made his appearance, as if he understood that now the human could take charge of the matter.

"It is all right, I reckon," said the outlaw chief to his companion, who had advanced and was looking over his shoulder.

"Thar's only one boat as I kin make out, and it ain't likely if any sheriff or marshal's arter us that they would try to make the raffle with the men they could fotch along in a single boat," remarked the outlaw with a grim smile.

And there was no idle boast in the words either, for Wildcat Jack had been known to whip both a town marshal and a county sheriff, with a dozen men at their backs, single-handed.

No man in this world fights as well as the desperado with a halter around his neck.

The sound of the paddles which were being used to propel the boat forward came plainly to the ears of the pair.

"They must be in sight now and I'll jest take a peep through the brush—jest for greens, you know, although I feel as sart'in as kin be that it is our men."

Wildcat Jack advanced to the edge of the island and peered out through the fringe of bushes which hung over the water.

As he had surmised his eyes fell upon a single "dug-out," as the rude boat common to the rivers, bayous and creeks of the Southwest is termed.

The name comes from the fact that the craft is formed of a tree-trunk, cut with an ax to the proper length, then rudely fashioned into the semblance of a boat on the outside—and the interior "dug out" with the same primitive tool, hence the name.

In the boat sat two men busily plying the paddles.

They were some distance off, but still near enough for Wildcat Jack to see them distinctly, and from the look on his face, and the satisfied way in which he nodded his head, it was plainly to be seen that the new-comers were the men whom he had expected.

Big Black Bill had followed hard on the heels of his comrade, and, after Wildcat Jack took a peep through the brush, he inquired:

"Wa-al, is it our men?"

"You kin jest bet it is!" Wildcat Jack replied, decidedly.

"Didn't I tell you so? I knowed it all the time."

"I wasn't the least bit afeard but what they would show up."

Then Big Black Bill took a look through the bushes.

"What do they want for to go and git themselves up arter that fashion fur?" he inquired.

"So that if anybody should happen to git a squint at them on the river they will not be apt to be recognized."

"It might not be easy for them to answer questions as to what they were doing on the drink, you know."

The men were dressed in a manner which would not be apt to excite attention.

They wore broad-brimmed, slouch hats, so common in this section, pulled down over their eyes, brown homespun pantaloons tucked into big boots, and the upper part of their bodies was hidden by rubber ponchos, as the square blanket with a hole in the middle through which the head is inserted is called.

The dug out was making straight for the island.

CHAPTER III.

FORMING THE BAND.

"You had better go and tend to dishing the cats," observed Wildcat Jack, with a grin, "for our friends mebbe will be hungry arter their journey and would like to pick a bit."

"Six small cats—not one of 'em over a half-pound afore they were cleaned—and two hoe-cakes will give a heap of picking for four men I reckon," growled Big Black Bill in reply.

"Well, it will be a gentle hint to them, I'm thinking, that two able-bodied men like we are can't be expected to live on air."

"You dish the fodder and I will go fur to meet them."

The pair retraced their steps.

Big Black Bill entered the cabin, while Wildcat Jack passed around it and went to the upper end of the island where the landing-place was situated.

This had been ingeniously contrived.

A little cove had been hollowed out inside the line of bushes which fringed the island, amply sufficient to accommodate four or five dug-

outs, and some of the bushes at the entrance had been cut away so that the boats could gain an easy access to the cove, and yet at the same time so skillfully had this work been performed that from the outside there was not the least indication to show that the bushes had been disturbed in any way.

The dug-out came steadily on, passed around the island until it reached the upper end, and then made directly for the cove.

Wildcat Jack was on hand to receive his visitors as the boat pushed its way through the bushes into the cove.

And now that the new-comers were near at hand it could be seen that both were heavily-bearded men, and wore their hair quite long.

This was not uncommon in the region, though, for barbers and hair-cutters are few and far between, and such a thing would not be apt to excite remark.

Both of the two in the boat appeared to be good-sized men, but with this difference, that while one was inclined to be lean, the other could boast of a goodly amount of flesh.

"Well, I was jist a-reckoning that mebbe you wouldn't be apt to come to-day," Wildcat Jack observed, as he stepped forward to greet the pair.

The portly man, who had yellow hair and a beard of the same hue, while his companion's hair and beard were red, was in the bow, and took it upon himself to reply:

"The storm did keep us back, for we should have been here two days ago, but we concluded to face it to-day, anyhow, as we had an idea, you know, that your fodder might be running low."

"We hain't got much left, and the whisky-jug is drained as dry as the inside of a gun-barrel."

"We've got a gallon here for you, and a saddle-bag full of supplies," and the speaker nodded to the rear of the boat, where the articles had been placed.

"You are mighty welcome, I tell you," exclaimed the outlaw.

Then the two men landed and drew the dug-out up on the bank by the side of the two boats belonging to the outlaws.

The red-bearded man looked around him with a curious gaze, as though the place was strange to him, and the other, noticing the look, said:

"Aha, this is your first visit to our friend Jack's retreat, I believe."

"Yes" replied he of the red beard.

"Well, look around and post yourself on the points; mebbe you will have to pay a professional visit here some time, and it will come mighty handy for you to know the ins and outs of the place."

And then all three of the men laughed, as though the speaker had uttered a good joke.

"I generally calculate to take good care of my friends when they come to see me," observed Wildcat Jack, "and I kin tell you what it is, if you should ever come this way on a professional visit I would be mighty sart'in to give you so warm a reception that it would astonish you."

And then they all laughed again.

"Well, I must say that you have got about as snug a hiding-place here as I ever struck," observed red-beard.

"But what is your idea of making a landing away on the upper end of the island? I should have thought it would have been more convenient for you to have landed at the lower end."

"Oh, no, thar's the danger of some spy smelling out my hole."

"Of course; don't you see?" observed the portly man.

"Why, it is as plain as the nose on your face. Suppose some time that Wildcat is caught on the river and his pursuers are right sharp arter him."

"He runs into the crick here for safety, but the others are so close behind that they see whar he has gone and come in after him. Then, if his landing was on the lower end of the island, he couldn't get ashore without revealing his secret to the gang after him, but with the landing at this point, the island hides him from sight, he makes his landing all right and the pursuers go by, thinking that he has doubled around some of the other islands."

Wildcat Jack nodded his head approvingly when the speaker finished in token that he had stated the facts of the case correctly.

Then the three proceeded to the cabin taking the jug and the saddle-bag with them.

"Durn my cat!" exclaimed Big Black Bill, as they entered.

"Now if I ain't glad to see you I wish I may be shot!"

And then he caught sight of the saddle-bag and the gallon jug.

"Aha, fire-water, by hookey! Wa-al, now, gents, I tell yer, you'r' as welcome as the flowers in the spring!"

Tin cups were immediately produced and the "fire-water" sampled, then Big Black Bill emptied the saddle-bag of its contents and stored the provision away in a rude sort of a corner cupboard.

This done he dished the fish, produced the hoe-cakes and invited the others to be seated.

"Come and jine in the feast, my gay galoots!"

he exclaimed, waving his hand with the air of a prince inviting honored guests to a banquet.

"Much obliged," said the portly man, "but I reckon thar isn't either one of us hungry."

Red-beard nodded assent to this conclusion.

"Well, I don't hanker much after fish myself, but as these air cats smell as if they might taste well I will take a bite," Wildcat Jack observed.

"That's right, and while you are eating I will explain to you a little scheme which my pard and myself have been cogitating about."

"Talking is dry work," suggested Big Black Bill, with a suggestive glance at the whisky jug.

"Right you are, and we'll begin at the beginning by taking a drink," and the portly stranger proceeded to "do the honors" with the liquid refreshment.

"Now, you fellows can eat while I talk," he continued, after the cups were emptied.

"Good enough," observed Wildcat Jack. "We will tackle the fodder, and you go ahead with your talk."

"It is business, every time, and you can bet on it," the portly man remarked.

Then he and his companion sat down on the rude couch, while the outlaws proceeded to attack the fish and the hoe-cakes.

"Now, boys," said the portly man, "my pard here and I have been putting our heads together and thinking over matters a little since we saw you last, and we think we have hit on a plan which will be certain to put a good deal of money in all our pockets."

"That is jest what we want!" Wildcat Jack observed.

"You kin bet it is!" chimed in Big Black Bill, with his mouth full of fish and hoe-cake.

"When you talk that way you hit us just whar we live!"

"Since we formed our partnership we have done tolerably well, although we have only run the thing a month."

"Yes, yes; we ain't got no complaints to make, have we?" said the outlaw chief to Big Black Bill.

"Oh, no, nary time; I reckon you have done the fair thing by us all the way through," that worthy responded.

"Well, as I observed, we have been talking the matter over, my pard here and I, and we have come to the conclusion that four such men as we are ought to be able to pick up a good deal of money if we only go about it the right way."

"Sure as you are born!" exclaimed the red-bearded man, with an approving nod.

Both of the outlaws also nodded assent, so it was clear that they were all of the same mind in regard to this matter.

"But, in order to make money enough to pay all four of us we must use some headwork. We must calculate and plan. We must go at it in such a way as to make every blow tell; it won't do to strike at random like a man in the dark," the portly stranger said.

"Now, my idea is to form an organization—a band, so to speak, with a chief, and then go to work in a systematic manner; strike at big game and make every blow tell."

The outlaws looked at each other, and from the expression upon their faces it was plain there was some little doubt in their minds.

"I suppose you will want to be the chief, hey?" observed Wildcat Jack, after a slight pause.

"That is as the rest shall decide," replied the portly man, with a laugh.

"The best man of us should be the chief—the man able to find the game, and plan how best it can be trapped, and for his trouble he is to be paid, of course, more than the rest. Say we divide the plunder into five shares, one apiece, and one extra for the captain. And, Wildcat, as you are a man of mettle, you can be captain, if you like."

CHAPTER IV.

THE ARMY CHEST OF JEFF DAVIS.

THIS proposal took the two outlaws entirely by surprise.

There was a little jealous feeling on their part when the scheme was broached—a sort of suspicion that the others were trying to get the best of them in some way, but the prompt offer to make Wildcat Jack the leader bothered them.

The outlaw thought over the matter for a moment, and then shook his head, and Big Black Bill, who being rather dull and stupid, found it convenient to take pattern by his smarter associate, shook his head also.

"No, no, I'm much obliged to you all the same, but I reckon I ain't exactly the kind of man to fill the bill."

"I kin do all the fighting that there is to be done, right up to the handle, and you kin bet all the money you kin raise on it, too, but when it comes to planning the jobs, I don't hardly think that trick would be in my line."

"Well, Big Black Bill, what do you say?" asked the portly stranger, addressing the second ruffian.

"How would you like to be captain?"

"What are you talking about?" demanded the big fellow in a disgusted sort of way.

"What sort of a cuss am I fer to be cap'n of a gang?"

"Go 'long! you are only poking fun at a feller!"

"Then you will not have it?"

"Nary time!"

"Well, old man," said tawny-beard, turning to his companion, "it lies between you and I then, since neither Wildcat Jack or Big Black Bill are willing to take the office."

"Oh! I will resign in your favor," responded the other.

"In my opinion, you are by long odds the best man of all of us to hold the position."

"Oh, yes, you are the man!" Wildcat Jack asserted.

"You kin bet on that, every time!" cried Big Black Bill, always ready to follow some one else's lead.

"Well, boys, I don't want to force myself forward, you know," the portly man remarked.

"I am willing to give any one of you the chance to head the band, but if you think I can fill the bill better than any one else, why, I am willing to take it."

"Of course, it is understood that if you don't like the way I run the machine you can choose some other man to boss the job."

"Oh, no, that will be all right!" exclaimed Wildcat, decidedly.

"If we are satisfied to but you in as captain we will toe the mark to a hair."

"Oh, you bet we will!" Big Black Bill cried.

"Now, then, we want to work this thing so we can make a heap of money out of it in a short time, for I propose to put in some big licks, and I think the chances are that inside of six months our reputation will be so established that the country will be too hot to hold us."

"Our game is to make a stroke before that time comes."

The rest nodded assent, for there was no disputing the soundness of the reasoning.

"We must do our work up in a ship-shape manner, and in the first place, we must take measures so that when we strike a blow the victims will not be able to give so good a description that any one will be able to identify us."

"Well, you and your pard are all right," Wildcat Jack observed.

"Yes, we will do, and you and Bill must get yourselves up after the same fashion."

"Then, it will be necessary sometimes for us to speak to each other while the work is going on, and as it will not do to call names, we must have some other way to address each other."

Again the others nodded as they listened with earnest attention to the words of the portly stranger.

"Suppose we use the letters of the alphabet—A, B, C and D?"

"Bully!" exclaimed Wildcat Jack, the idea catching his fancy.

"Big thing!" suggested the second outlaw, while red-beard contented himself with nodding his approbation.

"I will be A—Captain A, if you like; my pard here will answer to B. You, Wildcat, will be C, and Big Black Bill D."

"Now, that is all plain sailing, ain't it?"

The rest nodded.

"By means of this arrangement we can talk to each other before strangers without the slightest fear that they will be able to recognize us by means of our names."

"A mighty sharp dodge, I reckon," Wildcat Jack observed.

"Well, it will answer our purpose; and now that these preliminaries are settled, we will see if we can't hunt up some game."

"Just by accident the other day I struck a trail which I think will lead us to some plunder worth having."

The outlaws stopped eating and leaned forward eagerly at this announcement.

"That is what we are arter!" Wildcat Jack declared.

"You bet it is!" Big Black Bill exclaimed.

"The booty will be a rich one, if we can secure it, and though the gross amount be divided into five shares, yet each one of the shares will amount to a small fortune."

"The outlaws opened their eyes at this announcement."

They knew enough of the speaker to be aware that he was not a man to speak heedlessly.

On the contrary he was a man who usually weighted his words before he uttered them.

"A big haul, eh?" asked Wildcat Jack, reflectively.

"How much mought it be?" questioned Big Black Bill, bluntly.

"About one hundred thousand dollars in gold," responded Captain A, as we shall hereafter call him.

The outlaws stared; they could hardly believe that they had heard aright.

"How much?" exclaimed Wildcat Jack, his little greenish-gray eyes sparkling with eagerness.

"One hundred thousand dollars in gold," Captain A repeated, slowly, giving due emphasis to every word.

"Darn my cats! if that wouldn't be an awful haul!" Big Black Bill declared.

"Well, boys, I think we can make the rifle," Captain A observed confidently.

"And now let me explain how it is that such a sum is lying around loose in this hyer neck of the woods."

"You know, boys, I wore the gray, like the rest of you, in the late unpleasantness, but not in this department. I was on the other side of the river."

"When the war ended, I drifted to New Orleans, and there I met an old chum who had been on General Kirby Smith's staff, and then afterward attached to Jeff Davis's personal troops."

"Kirby, of course, you know, was in command here."

The others nodded; all three had served under him.

"Well, this old pard of mine was in hard luck and I helped him, for I had friends in New Orleans, and struck a good berth right after I got there."

"My old pard was one of the squarest of men, and took the assistance I tendered him freely, for he told me he knew he would be able to repay me some day, as he possessed an important secret which at some future time would be pretty sure to place a fortune in his hands."

"I knew that he wasn't talking at random when he said this, for he was not a man to make any statement that he couldn't back up."

"From that time until a few days ago, I neither saw nor heard from this party, then I unexpectedly received a letter from him."

"He was on his death-bed, and had written so as to square the debt to me, and as he hadn't the money, he sought to adjust the account by revealing the important secret."

The outlaws listened with eager attention.

"If you remember, boys, at the close of the war, Jeff Davis fled from the East and endeavored to reach the Mississippi with the idea of crossing it into Kirby Smith's department, where he hoped to carry on the struggle."

The others nodded.

"He was captured and the scheme knocked in the head, but a few of his party, who separated from him before the Yanks made their raid, got across the river, and this detachment had some of the baggage, and amid the baggage was Jeff Davis's army-chest, containing one hundred thousand dollars in gold."

"My old pard was one of the party, and only he and the commanding officer knew about the money."

"After getting on this bank the Yanks came after them so hotly, that in order to save the treasure, the colonel who commanded the squad and my pard buried the chest, and then the party separated, each man for himself."

"The colonel was shortly afterward killed, and my man thought himself the sole possessor of the secret."

"I see, and he reckoned on getting hold of the chest," Wildcat observed, deeply interested.

"Yes, but when he went, the chest was gone," said Captain A, continuing his tale.

"This completely upset him, for he knew that no one but himself and the colonel possessed the secret, and as the colonel was dead, he couldn't imagine what had become of the money."

"He made cautious inquiries in the neighborhood, and discovered to his astonishment that the report of the colonel's death was false."

"The man was alive and well, and had recently been in the section."

"The mystery was explained, the colonel had got away with the money."

"Then my pard started to hunt the man up, but was taken sick, and when the doctors told him that he hadn't many hours to live he wrote to me."

"And he gave the name of the kurnel, of course—and we kin hunt him up and rip some of the gold out of him!" cried Wildcat Jack, eagerly.

"The name of the officer was Jefferson Dangerfield!"

Both Wildcat Jack and Big Black Bill gave a howl of delight.

"Aha, I know him—know him like a book!" the chief outlaw cried.

"He's that big planter up on the Red, and that is whar he got his rocks from, and we'll knock a pile of them out of him, you bet yer boots!"

CHAPTER V.

THE STRANGER.

THE Planter's Hotel was the principal house of entertainment for man and beast in the town of Blazing Star, in fact the only hotel really, for the others, which sometimes cared for travelers, were nothing but boarding-houses.

But the Planter's was a "reg'lar first-class house," as the landlord, old fat Jake Sommerdyke was fond of asserting.

It was a rambling two-storied building, with the lower floor almost entirely occupied by the bar-room.

Really, the "Plant" was more bar-room than hotel, for without the income derived from the sale of liquor, the hotel could not have run.

Travelers were few and far between, rarely averaging over two or three a week, but the saloon did a good business, for the consumption of liquors in the Southwest is something astonishing.

When a man sells anything, he considers that he ought to "treat."

He treats, too, when he makes a purchase, and the average man seems always to be on the lookout to take a drink, either at his own expense, or at somebody else's.

It is in the thinly populated districts of the Southwest as in the heart of our great cities.

A man may often go hungry for want of bread; but, if he "knows the ropes," he seldom suffers from the lack of liquor.

On the morning which succeeded the day when the events recorded in our last chapter took place, a stranger rode into the town of Blazing Star, coming up the river road from the south, whose appearance excited universal attention.

Not that he was dressed in a manner calculated to cause comment, for he wore the "blanket coat," so common on the frontier, high riding-boots, with a pair of ordinary gray breeches stuffed into them, blue flannel shirt and a fawn-colored broad-brimmed slouch hat.

But the horseman was a noble-looking fellow, and sat his horse as though he had been born in the saddle.

He was a little above the medium hight, and magnificently built; one of those deceptive men who are so well proportioned that they seldom appear to be really as large as they are.

He had a long, oval face, clear-cut features; the firm mouth and resolute chin clearly betraying to the experienced eye that he was a man of indomitable will.

His dark hair, worn long after the Southern fashion, curled down behind his ears in tangled masses.

He had the upright carriage of the soldier, and his bronzed face told of an open, active, out-door life.

There was an air of command, too, which seemed to indicate that he was one who had been used to wielding authority.

The horseman rode through the town until he arrived in front of the Planter's Hotel; there he halted, dismounted, tied his horse in the shed, which was at one side of the house, and then entered the bar-room, which in all such houses of entertainment as this one of which we are writing, answers for the office.

The horseman entered the bar-room at an unfortunate moment for a quiet, peaceable man, for within the room was one of the notable men of the Blazing Star district—a tolerably decent fellow when he was sober, but when on a spree, as he was at this time, as ugly a man as could be found in the whole State of Arkansas.

He was a small planter, living some ten miles up the river; Abraham Smith by name, but from the fact that his place bordered on a small stream running into Red River, known as Catfish Creek, and also from the fact that he possessed an enormous mouth—in which fact, strange to say, he took great pride—he was usually called Catfish Smith.

And far from resenting the application of the odd nick-name, he gloried in it, particularly when under the influence of liquor.

Smith was a man of forty, odd, a medium-sized fellow, not particularly strong or muscular; but when he got a sufficient quantity of liquor on board, the notion always seized upon him that he was a perfect giant, and was a match for any man in the world at a fisticuff bout.

If he would only have confined himself to the use of the weapons which nature had given him he would not have been half the trouble that he was.

But the moment he got into a fight—in which he was almost invariably the aggressor—the first severe blow he received seemed to turn him into a demon, and then the quicker he produced his weapons the better it seemed to him.

As a natural consequence, he had been concerned in at least a dozen "cutting" and shooting brawls, and as a rule he came out the conqueror; and though on several occasions he had come pretty near to killing his man, yet, so lax is the law in regard to these personal affrays in the Southwest, he had never been severely punished.

So Catfish Smith had acquired the reputation of being one of the most dangerous men, when on a "tear," that ever came into the town of Blazing Star.

And it was not thought to be a reflection upon the courage of any man if he saw fit to give Catfish Smith a "wide berth" when encountered on a spree.

Catfish had entered the hotel bar-room about an hour before the time of the stranger's arrival and being in the mood for a "high old time," having disposed of some of his crops, and therefore being "flush," proceeded with the aid of a couple of the bums of the town, "Judge" Baldy Perkins and "General" George Washington Bitters, to make things "lively."

The landlord, old fat Jake, who usually presided behind the bar, did his best to be agreeable to his rather unwelcome guest, for although Catfish was no niggard in regard to the spending of his money, when on one of these sprees, yet when he became quarrelsome he cared not a fig what damage he did to the place where he chanced to be.

Just at the time when the stranger entered the

room Catfish Smith had reached the quarrelsome stage, but he could not well quarrel with his companions, for the bummers stood so much in awe of their liberal host, that if he had demanded that they should extend themselves prostrate on the floor so that he might walk over them, there is not the least doubt they would have instantly hastened to comply with the request.

As for the landlord, jolly fat Jake, he could not be more anxious to please his guest if he had been the greatest man in the land.

In his ugly way the roysterer had tried to draw his companions into a quarrel, but they wouldn't quarrel, even though Smith had thrown a glass of whisky in the face of Baldy Perkins, under pretense that it was dirty and needed washing, and pulled General George Washington Bitters's nose, until the tears came into the eyes of the fat and greasy-looking bummer.

He had even reached over the bar and plucked the landlord's long, sandy-gray chin-piece in no gentle way.

It was no avail though, for all three laughed as if they enjoyed these personal familiarities, and Catfish Smith, in disgust at their timidity, was just about thinking that he would have to go out in the street and hunt up a fight when the stranger entered.

"Can I get to stay with you for a while?" asked the horseman, using the odd phrase so common in that part of the country of which we write, advancing to the bar as he spoke, and addressing the landlord.

Catfish Smith did not give the old man a chance to reply.

"Dog my cats! stranger, ef you don't walk in hyer as if you owned the hull town!" he exclaimed.

The horseman turned and surveyed the speaker a moment before he made reply.

The glance revealed to him the truth—a man of little sense, "fighting drunk," and ripe for mischief.

There was neither pleasure nor honor to be got out of a quarrel with such a man, and the stranger was disposed to avoid a difficulty if he could.

"Oh, no, I don't even own a brick in it," he replied with a pleasant smile.

"But if I conclude to drive my stakes here, I shall hope that in time I may be more fortunate."

"Will you have a [drink with me, gentlemen?"

Such an invitation, being seldom refused in the bar-room of the Planter's Hotel, old Jake hastened to produce the whisky bottle and set out the glasses.

But Catfish Smith scowled in an ugly way, and waved back the glasses with a disdainful motion.

"Stranger, it 'pears to to me that you are getting the deadwood on me in a way I dispise!" he ejaculated.

"I was jist a-going to ask you to h'ist a leetle p'ison, myself," he continued, "and I don't think it is the square thing for you to take the words right outen my mouth."

"All right! I'll take a drink with you then!" the stranger exclaimed in a sociable sort of way.

"No you won't by a durned sight!" the other cried angrily.

"I want you to understand that I am a gentleman, I am, and I don't allow no two-legged man to invite himself to take a drink with me!"

The horseman surveyed the planter for a moment, a quiet smile on his lips, but a peculiar gleam in his clear eyes.

"Well, stranger, it seems to me that you are a mighty hard customer to satisfy."

"You will not take a drink with me and now you insinuate that I want to ring in on your party."

"I never saw you before, and I do not know who you are from a side of sole-leather, but this I will say, I have traveled much in my time and have seen a good many men in a good many places, and, in my opinion, you are the champion—you are the boss liar!"

Catfish Smith fairly reeled as the name was hurled at him as though he had been struck in the face.

And as for the bummers and the landlord they fairly trembled at the daring exhibited by the stranger. To their thinking it was like bearding the lion in his den.

CHAPTER VI.

CATFISH SMITH IS ASTONISHED.

FOR the moment the planter was so much astonished that he almost lost the power of speech.

He had been braved to his teeth before but never in this cool and quiet way, and like the wild beast who far in the forest wild comes across a trap and, detecting by his keen sense of smell that his dreaded enemy, man, has had something to do with the strange thing, carefully examines it on all sides before he attempts to possess himself of the bait, exposed so temptingly to view, so Catfish Smith, with his low cunning, thought that the stranger must be all prepared to take him unawares in some way, or else he would never have dared to speak so insultingly to his very face.

Yet, as far as he could see, the stranger did

not even possess a weapon, much less be ready to use one.

Still, for all that, Catfish Smith suspected a trap and so hesitated to precipitate a conflict until he ascertained the stranger's game.

"What is that you say?" he exclaimed threateningly, as soon as he could recover his breath, which had been in a measure taken away from him by the unexpected action of the other.

"That, in my opinion, you are the biggest liar I ever ran across," the horseman replied, coolly and distinctly.

Catfish Smith was all eyes, but could not see that the stranger was armed or prepared for the struggle in any way, but still he thought he must be up to some "gum-game," or he would not dare to be so bold.

Then a sudden thought came to him.

The man was a stranger—possibly he did not know that he was daring to affront the terror of the district.

Perhaps, though, when the stranger knew who he was, he would be apt to sing a different song, for the planter, in his egotism, imagined that his fame as a fighting man extended miles and miles.

"Say, do you know who I am?" he demanded, placing his arms on his hips and endeavoring to look as warlike as possible.

"No; I am a stranger in this district, but I don't feel the least bit of curiosity in regard to the subject."

"From what I have seen of you, I should say that you are not a man whose acquaintance would be particularly desirable."

"I'm Catfish Smith!" the planter announced, swelling with importance.

"Well, I reckon you are tolerably well-named," the other observed, carelessly.

"Your mouth resembles a catfish, anyway, if no other part of you does."

"I'm an ugly man to tackle when I get on the war-path," warned the planter.

"An ugly man to tackle a dinner, to judge from the size of your mouth."

"What is your handle?"

"It is no business of yours."

"Mebbe I will make it my business!" cried Smith, threateningly.

"Mebbe you will not!"

"Say, it kinder goes ag'in' my grain to chew you up without letting you know what kind of an animal has got hold on you."

"So, 'fore we talk any more, you had better go out and tell your friends about the man you have run up against, and see what they say about it."

"Friends!" and the stranger laughed, "why, I havn't got an acquaintance, much less a friend, for three hundred miles. I'm here all alone."

"Going to play a lone hand, eh?"

"Well, I will try to keep my end of the flat-boat moving all I can."

"Now, Mr. Lone Hand, if you know when you are well off, you will git out of hyer as quick as yer legs will let you!"

"I don't want to take no unfair advantage of you—"

"I don't mean that you shall!" exclaimed the stranger.

"And so I want to give you fair warning that thar ain't any ten men in this town anxious to tackle me when I get on the war-path."

"Then all I have got to say is that Blazing Star must be settled by the biggest lot of cowards to be found in the State of Arkansas."

"I will give you jist two minutes to get out of here, Mister Lone Hand, and then, if you ain't gone, I will climb you in a way that you won't forget in a month."

"I will give you a reg'lar Arkansas bear-hug and arter a man once goes through that it is apt to make him wish that he had never struck the State."

"You are as full of gas as a balloon!" the Lone Hand said—to give him the title which Catfish Smith had affixed to him, and which really fitted the stranger well, for in the game which he had come to the neighborhood of Blazing Star to play he would indeed play a "lone hand."

"Some one ought to stick a pin in you and let the gas out!"

With a yell of rage at this insult, Catfish Smith jumped at the stranger, aiming a mighty blow at his face.

Now, whatever might be the skill of the Arkansas man as a "rough and tumble" fighter, as a boxer he was a mere novice, and the Lone Hand, being skillful in the use of his fists, parried the stroke without the least difficulty, and then, with surprising quickness, "banged" Catfish Smith right and left.

Never in all his experience had the Arkansas man been handled in such a manner.

Completely bewildered by the storm of blows he retreated, and as he happened to be in the direct line of the door he backed through into the street, the Lone Hand following him up closely, while the landlord and the two bummers, in great amazement, brought up the rear.

When Catfish was fairly in the street the Lone Hand administered the finishing touch in the shape of a powerful right-hander which, landing on the chest, sent the Arkansian to "grass" in an extremely summary manner.

A crowd collected immediately for the main street of Blazing Star had never before witnessed any such fisticuff match.

For a couple of minutes Catfish Smith lay on his back, gasping for breath.

His defeat had been accomplished so easily that he knew not what to think of it.

One thing he was sure of though, and that was that he had never been so roughly handled since the days when his aged sire used to tame the wildness of his youthful blood with a harness strap.

The throng which had so quickly assembled, gave a yell when they saw the terror of the town prostrated upon the ground in this unceremonious way.

There was not a man who witnessed the sight who did not rejoice at the discomfiture of the bully who had so long lorded it over Blazing Star.

Catfish Smith was in a terrible rage and, in his blind fury at the way he had been handled, he got the idea in his head that if it had not been for the success which had attended the stranger's first blow—which had so confused him that he was not able to hold his own, his antagonist would not have been able to triumph over him so easily.

So, as soon as he recovered his breath, he began to pick himself up and reached for his revolver as he did so.

No more fist-fighting for him; he had had enough of that sort of work.

Powder and lead must now serve his turn.

But the Lone Hand was not taken unawares by this proceeding on the part of his antagonist, for he had anticipated just such a move.

He had taken the measure of his man pretty well, and had judged that he would not be satisfied with the drubbing he had received.

So the moment Catfish Smith staggered to his feet, hardly able to stand, for the sound thrashing had taken about all the wind out of him, the Lone Hand was ready for the movement.

With wonderful quickness for so large and powerful a man he sprung upon the Arkansian, and before Catfish Smith could bring the revolver to bear, he grasped the hand which clutched the weapon and twisting his wrist—a proceeding which brought from Catfish Smith a howl of pain—compelled him to drop the revolver.

The other was now desperate to madness; he closed in with his antagonist and endeavored to get at his knife.

The Lone Hand was on his guard, and perceiving that it was necessary to use extreme measures, he allowed Catfish Smith to draw his knife and then by a dexterous twist, deprived him of it.

Clutching his opponent by the throat the Lone Hand dragged him to the river's bank.

It was the season of high water and the stream was some five feet deep at the bank.

Into the water the Lone Hand plunged Catfish Smith, kneeling on the edge and pushing the other under, head and all, for a moment.

Then Catfish Smith came to the surface half-strangled by the douse.

"You dog-goned scoundrel, lemme go!" he spluttered, blowing the water out of his mouth.

"Have you got enough?" the Lone Hand queried.

"I'll have your heart's blood for this!" roared Catfish Smith in a terrible passion.

"My friend, you are excited; take another dip to cool your anger!"

And again he soused Catfish Smith under the surface, despite his struggles to prevent it, and held him there for fully a minute, as it seemed to the spectators, who were watching the fun with a great deal of satisfaction.

This time Catfish Smith was almost strangled when his head came out of the water and he coughed and spluttered as though he would never get through.

"Have you got enough?" again asked the Lone Hand.

"You be—"

Souse!—under the water he went, drowning the rest of the sentence, and as Catfish Smith's mouth was wide open when he was ducked he got a terrible dose.

When the Lone Hand allowed him to rise to the surface, which he did after a moment or two, it was not necessary for the visitor to repeat the question.

Catfish Smith had had enough, and said so, as soon as he could recover his breath, in the most emphatic manner.

Then the Lone Hand released him and the speedy manner in which the planter departed was wonderful.

The stranger was the lion of the hour.

All were eager to make his acquaintance.

CHAPTER VII.

OLD ACQUAINTANCES.

IN the saloon he held quite a levee, and if he had only accepted a tenth part of the numerous invitations to drink, which were so freely tendered him by the delighted citizens, overjoyed at the defeat and disgrace of the up-river planter who had long been the terror of the town, it is more than probable that in a very short

time the stranger would not have been able to stand.

But he was a temperate man and firm enough to be able to say "no."

In answer to the inquiries of the citizens, he stated that his name was L. Hand, and volunteered the information that he was both a civil engineer and a lawyer by profession, and was prospecting for a good place to settle.

Of course, as was only natural under the circumstances, one and all hymned the praise of the town of Blazing Star, assuring the newcomer that nowhere along Red River could he discover a town where he would find a better opening.

The stranger said he intended to spend a week or two in Blazing Star anyway, and that would give him plenty of time to look around and make up his mind.

Then the stranger was shown up to his room, and the citizens departed.

When the new-comer had given the name of L. Hand, no one had wit enough to notice that it was exactly the same appellation that the fight-seeking Catfish Smith had bestowed upon him, and the natural inference was that the stranger had given the first name which had come into his head, instead of the true one.

Still, if any one had noticed the fact, it is not likely anything would be said about it, for in the wilds of the Southwest, as on the frontier and in the mining regions, it is not considered the correct thing to express any doubts as to a man's statement in regard to his name.

In fact, any particular curiosity on this ticklish subject in the locality where many men, who have left their country for their country's good, have found homes, would be indignantly resented.

Among the throng which had gathered, attracted by the contest—not arriving, however, until just at the end of the affair—was the physician of the town, a young man who had only hung out his "shingle" during the past few months, by name, Martin Williamson.

He was a man of thirty, or thereabouts—a blonde-haired, blue-eyed, round-faced fellow, about the medium height, a perfect gentleman in all respects, and a man who had already made a favorable impression upon the inhabitants of Blazing Star and its neighborhood, although there was almost as much difference between him and the old country doctor whose place he had taken—death having removed the other to a better world—as there is between daylight and darkness.

And some of the wiser heads in the town wondered why so bright a fellow and good a doctor as the young man appeared to be, should settle in such a small town as Blazing Star; and when some, more curious than the others, questioned him on this point, he answered that, in his judgment, Blazing Star was destined to be a big town one of these days, and he had come to "grow up with the country."

This silenced the questioners, for it would be the rankest kind of high-treason for any resident in the town to doubt that in time it would "knock" any other "city" on Red River clear from the Mississippi to the great plains.

The young doctor had followed the Lone Hand into the saloon with the rest of the crowd, but had not approached the hero of the hour and "scraped" an acquaintance with him like the rest.

On the contrary, he remained in the background, watching the stranger quietly though, and from the expression upon his features, a good reader of the "human face divine" would have been apt to come to the conclusion that the new-comer was no stranger to him.

After the Lone Hand was conducted by the landlord to his room, the young doctor took occasion to note the number of L. Hand's apartment, and then leaving the saloon, proceeded to it.

His knock at the door was answered by the stranger.

The moment they came face to face a glance of recognition was exchanged between them.

"Mart Williamson, by all that's good!" the Lone Hand exclaimed.

"Old fellow, I thought I couldn't be mistaken—I'm deuced glad to see you!"

And then the two shook hands warmly.

"Come in, come in!" exclaimed the Lone Hand.

The young doctor obeyed; the Lone Hand closed the door, brought chairs and then produced cigars, and after the fragrant "weeds" were lighted the conversation began.

"Well, upon my word, Mart, you are the last man I expected to see in this town!" the Lone Hand exclaimed.

"And I can say the same, for your appearance here has taken me entirely by surprise; but, though it is nearly ten years since we met, I remember you at once for you are hardly a day older in looks."

"Well, time has dealt gently enough with you, too. You look as young as ever."

I have studied deuced hard; I am a doctor now—a full-fledged doctor, licensed to kill or cure."

"For your sake I hope it is the latter more often than the former."

"I have no reason to complain; I have done very well so far."

"If you remember that when we were mustered out at the end of the war I told you then that I had resolved to study for a doctor, for I had had all the soldiering I cared for."

"Yes, you wanted a chance to kill your man without his being able to return the compliment," jestingly remarked the other.

"By Jove! as far as I have got in the profession I think a doctor runs a deuced sight more risk than a soldier."

"Just imagine being called out of a nice warm bed on a cold winter's night to ride ten miles, maybe, in a pitiless storm, and then find the patient suffering from a disease contagious enough in its nature to infect a whole township."

"But, to stop jesting and come down to facts, I went East and studied like a major for a good three years."

"Then I went abroad and took two years in London, Paris and on the Continent, so I can boast that when I started in to practice—regularly hung out my shingle, you know—I was in better trim for my profession than ninety-nine out of every hundred new doctors who start."

"But for a man of your education and abilities, it seems to me that this is a deuced queer spot for you to settle—this miserable little rat-hole of a town," observed the Lone Hand, referring in this contemptuous manner to Blazing Star, which he had "captured" so completely that day.

"Ah, thereby hangs a tale!" exclaimed the young doctor with a sigh.

"I started as assistant to an old doctor who had an extremely large practice in one of the beautiful suburban towns a few miles from Boston, in the old Bay State, the modern Athens, you know."

"Two-thirds of the inhabitants were people who did business in Boston and the society, of course, was excellent."

"I was getting on finely when a little event happened which induced me to get the old doctor to release me for awhile, and turned my wandering footsteps to this remote corner."

"I do not in the least doubt your abilities in the doctoring line, for in the old time when I was stretched upon my back with a minie bullet too near to my lungs to be comfortable, I feel sure that to your careful nursing I owe my life."

And the stranger extended his hand to the young doctor, who warmly pressed it.

"Oh, don't say anything about that!" Williamson exclaimed.

"Just think of all the scrapes you got me out of, and then at the battle of the Saline, when I was knocked down by a fragment of a shell and stunned; all the rest thought I was dead, and would have left me where I had fallen on the field, and most certainly I would have had the life trampled out of me when Fagan's cavalry pushed on after our retreating forces, if you had not taken me up on your horse and carried me along in the race for Little Rock which took place between our boys and the Confeds."

"So, if I did help you through I was only paying the debt I owed."

And then the two friends again shook hands.

"Of course, I keep the fact that I was an officer in the Union army in the background down in this country, for although it is ten years since the war ended, yet there is a deal of bitterness in regard to the struggle still existing."

"I came up here by way of the river from New Orleans, and everybody takes me to be a Georgian, from a casual remark which I happened to make about Atlanta, and I have never tried to undeceive them."

"A wise course, for the people would be apt to make it unpleasant for you if you did."

"But I say, what is the meaning of the L. Hand business? Why are you traveling under false colors?"

"Come, come, old fellow, since there is a mystery about your movements, which, undoubtedly, you will not care to reveal, you must not ask questions in regard to me," the Lone Hand replied with a smile.

"There, old fellow, is where you are mistaken, and you never made a greater mistake in your life," and the young doctor placed his hand, impressively, on the knee of the other.

"I am going to confide my secret to you, and ask your advice, and now don't think that I expect you to give me your confidence, for I don't; I can understand why there may be reasons for you not being able so to do, but in my case there isn't, so I'm going to make a clean breast of it."

"You are right in regard to myself," the Lone Hand remarked, slowly.

"My secret is not my own and it would hardly be fair to the others who are concerned in it for me to speak."

"But, as regards your matter, if I can be of the least aid do not hesitate to call upon me, for I will gladly do everything I can for you."

"But you know that, of course, without my saying it. So fire away with your tale!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DOCTOR'S STORY.

THUS admonished, Williamson began:

"Do you remember the old story of the wise

Eastern ruler who whenever any trouble was reported to him immediately said:

"Look for the woman!"

"Oh, yes, the tale still lingers in my memory," the Lone Hand observed with a smile.

"And, in strict confidence, old fellow, the Moslem was nearer right than most people are willing to give him credit for; there is no mistaking the fact that woman—lovely woman—has been responsible for a great many disturbances since the little apple affair in the Garden of Eden when Mother Eve allowed the serpent to persuade her with his wily tongue."

"Well, the old rascal of a Turk would have hit me plumb between the eyes, for it is a woman who is responsible for my being here in this 'delightful' town of Blazing Star today."

"I must say, Williamson, that I cannot admire your taste, for, as far as I have seen, the women of the town are a pretty poor lot."

"Oh, you are right there; your judgment is perfectly correct, and there isn't any mistake about it."

"A worse-looking lot of women than the ones here in Blazing Star would be hard to find. And then most all of them 'dip snuff,' as that disgusting practice of rubbing snuff on their teeth and gums is called."

"But my beauty—and she is a beauty too if there ever was one—is not a resident of Blazing Star."

"I should not imagine that she was, for you must have changed wonderfully from the man I once knew, if any of these lank, sawn-skinned, southwestern girls could be able to captivate you."

"Oh, come now, you are a little too severe in your remarks. There are some good-looking women down in this country, you know!" Williamson exclaimed.

"They are not all lank and sawn, old fellow."

"Your speech is true as far as regards the usual run of girls in this country I will admit, but even you must own that there is a better class here to whom your words will not apply."

"Yes, you are right there, but they are few and far between."

"You must remember that the struggle for existence in all these new countries is somewhat harder than in more civilized regions."

"First, the man must secure food and shelter, then the comforts and the luxuries come in, and with them comes culture."

"The women here work hard, subsist on poor food and submit to many privations, and, if you have ever made any study of the subject, you must understand that these conditions are not favorable to the development of beauty in either man or woman."

"Very true."

"Take the better class here—what might be called the aristocracy and they will compare favorably with the better class of any other region."

"Oh, yes, there isn't any mistake about that, and the charmer who has attracted you belongs to the upper ten down here, of course."

"Yes, she is a planter's daughter, her father has a place on the Red River a few miles from here, a big plantation—two or three thousand acres, and is supposed to be the wealthiest man on the upper Red River."

"This fact I have ascertained since taking up my residence in this town, although I knew the old gentleman was well fixed, to use the slang of the day, yet I hadn't any idea that he was such a nabob until I came to live in Blazing Star."

"You met the girl in the East then, I presume?"

"Yes, in the town where I practiced was one of the most famous schools for young ladies in the country and she was a pupil."

"The old doctor—his name, by the way was John Morton—was the physician of the school."

"But this particular young lady of whom I speak, happened to be taken sick one day when the doctor was absent and so I was called in."

"And it was a case of love at first sight I suppose."

"Yes, that was about the way of it."

"Of course, it was not an easy matter for me to get many chances to enjoy her society, but you know there's an old saw that 'love laughs at locksmiths?'"

"Yes, and another one that 'stolen pleasures are sweetest.'"

"Both are correct, I guess."

"Well, although we only met at rare intervals, and had to be on our guard all the time, we contrived to find out that we thought a great deal of each other."

"There were obstacles in the way, of course; there always are, you know."

"Certainly the course of true love never does run smooth. So the saying is, but, old fellow, it is not as true as it might be."

"Exceptions prove the rule, you know," the young doctor replied, with a laugh.

"Yes, that is true enough, I suppose," the Lone Hand admitted.

"In this case the obstacle which intervened to separate me from my lady-love, although appar-

ently not amounting to much, was in reality a pretty serious one.

"The girl was the daughter of a southern colonel, a man well in years who had staked a fortune on the success of the Confederate side and lost, thanks to the boys in blue.

"Now, as a rule, according to my experience, the men who fought bear very little ill-will toward each other, it is the stay-at-homes, who ventured and risked nothing, that display sectional bitterness."

"That is the way I have found it."

"But in the war the old colonel had lost his only son, a young man whom he prized as the apple of his eye, and for the loss of this son he never forgave the North.

"That was the barrier which existed between myself and the girl.

"She was sure that her father would never consent to her marrying a Northerner."

"In her youth and inexperience this seemed to her, I presume, a very great obstacle indeed, but as a hundred times it has been proved, such a thing amounts to very little," the other remarked.

"That is the way I looked at it and I tried to tell her so, but she, naturally, believed that she knew her father better than I did.

"She finished her schooling about six months ago, and then the programme was for her to take a six months' tour in Europe with a party of friends and after her return to come and dwell with her father on his plantation here.

"Then I formed a scheme which I confided to her and it met with her warmest approval, and that was to come and settle here at Blazing Star as a doctor, so I would be able to make her father's acquaintance and win his good will before he had any idea that I knew anything about his daughter."

"The idea was a capital one," the Lone Hand remarked.

"Well, it struck me that it wasn't a bad one. So, just about the time that my lady-love started on her European tour I came here to Blazing Star.

"Luck seemed to favor me for I arrived just as the old doctor was paying the debt of nature, so there was a vacant place all ready for me to step into."

"This was six months ago?"

"Yes."

"Well, you must be pretty well posted in regard to the neighborhood by this time."

"Oh, yes, I am, and as it happened one of the first patients I was called upon to attend was the old colonel, the father of my girl, himself."

"That was lucky."

"Yes, and I was fortunate enough to make a favorable impression upon him.

"I know this from the fact that he has spoken openly in the most favorable terms of me, and remarked that such young men as myself were a credit to the South."

"You have kept quiet the fact that you are not only a Northern man but also served in the Union Army?"

"Yes; I had a debate with myself in regard to the matter, and I came to the conclusion that the deception was an innocent one, and that, considering the circumstances, it was perfectly justifiable."

"I think so; it harms no one."

"And then the old man is perfectly rabid on the subject of the North."

"The girl was right, although at the time I thought she was overdrawing the thing, but in reality she understated it.

"I understand: the subject has become a mania with him. He, after years of an active life, probably, has retired to the solitude of his plantation, where, cut off from society, he has ample time to brood over the memories of the past."

"You have hit on the truth, and so I have kept quiet the fact that I am a Northern man. I feel perfectly satisfied, you know, that, although at present I have his friendship and esteem, if he should discover I am from the North, the simple fact would upset all the good opinions he has of me."

"From what you have told me I can understand how such a thing could be.

"I presume the colonel is inclined to be dogmatic and overbearing?"

"Oh yes; he is an impetuous and rather arrogant man at all times, impatient of contradiction and determined upon having his own way."

"The game my lady-love and I have to play is a difficult one."

"She knows I am of Northern birth, but not that I am a Union officer, although that wouldn't make any difference to her, for, strange fact, she did not believe in the Southern cause, and had a mortal horror of slavery."

"I expect her back every day now, for the colonel has often spoken to me about his daughter, never suspecting that I knew her; and only yesterday he told me that she was due here now."

"I have a hard fight before me, for no more obstinate man walks the earth than this same Jefferson Dangerfield."

"Colonel Dangerfield! is it possible?" the Lone Hand cries.

CHAPTER IX.

THE LONE HAND'S MISSION.

DOCTOR WILLIAMSON looked at his friend in astonishment when the exclamation escaped him.

"Hullo! Is it possible that you are acquainted with the father of my charmer?"

"No; I have never had the pleasure of meeting Colonel Jefferson Dangerfield," the Lone Hand replied, with a quiet smile.

"What is the meaning then of your exclamation at the announcement of his name?"

"Thereby hangs a tale! I have heard of Colonel Dangerfield, although I never met him, and, in fact, to him is partly due my presence here to-day in Blazing Star."

"Really, you astonish me," the young doctor exclaimed.

"It is a fact, and I consider it a deuced queer thing, too, that I should come down to this—to me—unknown country, drawn here by business relative to a man whom I have never seen, and should encounter you here, my ancient friend, and make the discovery that you too have a divided interest in the same party."

"Yes, it is an odd thing; but then, you know, old chum, it is as the French say, 'it is the unexpected which is always happening.'"

"An extremely true saying, too. You came to this remote spot to win the girl you love, without a single acquaintance in the place; embarked in a single-handed game, so to speak, and I come down here, without any idea that I should meet a friend, to play a lone hand."

"And part of my business concerns the very same Southern colonel with whom you will have to do."

"But whether I will be able to be of any assistance to you or not is a question."

"Well, it is odd."

And then the Lone Hand fell into a brown study for a few minutes, knitting his brows together as if in earnest thought.

The young doctor did not attempt to disturb his meditations.

At last the Lone Hand raised his head, looked around him for a moment, and then said:

"Are you familiar with this hotel?"

"Oh, yes; I board here."

"Ah! then you must be posted."

"I am; I occupy the next room."

"Is there any danger of any one playing the eavesdropper on our conversation?"

"A spy?"

"Yes."

"Very little," Doctor Williamson replied, confidently.

"You are sure?"

"Perfectly so."

"Because I have something important to say to you, and it would be apt to upset all my plans if my words were overheard by any one who had wit enough to carry a report of my conversation to certain parties."

"There is hardly a doubt that you can speak without fear, for there is little danger of your words being overheard."

"In the first place, this room is in a small wing of the house, and there are only two rooms in the wing—this one and my own."

"In the next, there are only three boarders in the house besides myself, and their rooms are in the other end of the building, and they are never home at this time of day."

"Then, the family are busily engaged downstairs, and lastly, this is a well-built house, with good, solid walls—one of the old-timers, none of your modern shells; and it is not possible in the halls to overhear a conversation carried on in the rooms in ordinary tones."

"Then I can speak without fear?"

"Surely!"

"I told you in the beginning that I had a secret, but hesitated to speak in regard to it because it concerned others besides myself."

The doctor nodded.

"I have reflected over the matter and have come to the conclusion that I can afford to trust you with the secret, for, in the first place, I know it will be safe in your possession, and in the second, if you know what my game is, it may turn out that you might derive some aid from it."

"Old fellow, there isn't any need of my assuring you that you can trust me, for you know you can."

"Pay heed then."

"I am all attention."

"Since we were mustered out of the army ten years ago I have led a life of adventure," the Lone Hand began.

"I always had a spice of the Old Boy in me, and a quiet, humdrum life would never suit me."

"On the frontier of civilization I led an existence which exactly agreed with my ideas."

"By a chain of circumstances, not worth the trouble of explaining in detail, I became a member of the Government force, known as the Secret Service Men."

"Yes, yes, I have often heard of them, although I never happened to come in actual contact with any of them."

"It is a detective force employed to hunt down offenders against the United States laws."

"Step by step I have risen until I am in com-

mand of this entire Southwestern department, with headquarters at Little Rock."

"Little Rock on the Arkansas, eh? as we used to recite in our schoolboy days, and that is an old 'stamping ground.'"

"Yes, but the town has changed materially for the better in the ten years which have elapsed since the war; you would hardly know Main or Markham streets now."

"But to resume:

"About ten days ago a stranger was taken sick at one of the Little Rock hotels."

"His room was on the same corridor as mine, and as I had formed a chance acquaintance with the man—he was an old soldier, although he had worn the gray instead of the blue—therefore I considered him entitled to my aid, particularly when it was discovered that the man was without means."

"His illness was mortal—the doctor told him so on his first visit, and advised him to put his earthly affairs in order."

"In three days he was dead."

"Quick work," suggested Williamson, with a shake of the head.

"Yes, I watched by his bedside each night, for he had to have his medicine every two hours, although there wasn't any hope of saving him, yet the drugs, being soothing draughts, helped to smooth his passage to the other world."

"On the last night, just before he died, he became delirious, and the old memories of the war came back to him."

"He had been one of the body-guard who had escorted Jeff Davis, when he fled from the East—as Grant pounded Lee's army to pieces—and tried his best to reach Kirby Smith in the Trans-Mississippi department."

"This man had charge of the baggage, and just before the capture of the Confederate president, he, with some others, became separated from Davis, and contrived to reach and cross the Mississippi."

"This is getting interesting."

"The most interesting part is yet to come," the other said.

"This party carried Jeff Davis's army-chest with them, and in that chest was a hundred thousand dollars in gold."

"Aha!"

"After crossing, the Union troops came so thickly around them that, fearing capture, the colonel in command of the party determined to conceal the treasure, which he did by burying the trunk, with the assistance of this sick man, who alone shared the secret."

"A year or so after this time, the patient, hearing that the colonel was dead, thought he would help himself to the gold."

"A natural conclusion, indeed."

"He sought but found it not; the chest was gone. He tried to find a clew, but was baffled."

"Years passed on. At last he came to Little Rock and, in a chance conversation with a stranger in the hotel bar-room, made the surprising discovery that the colonel was not dead."

"He was alive, and reputed to be the richest planter on the upper Red River."

At this point Doctor Williamson nodded his head and an expression appeared upon his face which seemed to say that he had guessed the end of the story.

The Lone Hand went on.

"All was plain to him now; the colonel had possessed himself of the one hundred thousand dollars, and this was the secret of his enormous wealth."

"The very next day he was taken sick, and the third night after, as I sat by his bedside, in the still hours of the early morning, I listened to his ravings, and from them easily put together this story."

"In the morning the man was dead. You can guess the name of the colonel, I presume!"

"Jefferson Dangerfield!" replied Williamson, promptly.

"Of course there is a chance that I may have been deceived by the wild ravings of a sick man, but I don't think so, and took stock enough in the story to undertake a trip down here with the idea of looking into the matter."

"That hundred thousand dollars in gold, if it really exists, is the property of the United States, who, of course, is the heir by right of conquest."

"Now, if Dangerfield has that gold, my idea was to make him come to a settlement, but it may be a difficult matter to prove, and if I can turn this gold business to your advantage in any way, I think I shall be justified in so doing, for the secret is my property, and I think I ought to have the right to act as I see fit in the matter."

"Most decidedly; you did not come in possession of the secret while engaged upon any Government business, and, therefore, most surely it is your own. And from what I know of Colonel Dangerfield's affairs, I do not think there is the least doubt but what he got the money."

"This explains his sudden rise in the world, a circumstance which has puzzled all who knew him."

"He came back from the war a ruined man, like the majority of the Southern officers."

"His plantation was a small one, only a couple of hundred acres, and as his greatest wealth

consisted of his negroes and stock, both of which vanished during his absence, he was pretty badly off when he started in to build his fortune up anew.

"Under such circumstances a man can't better his fortune very rapidly."

"No, not rapidly."

"But Colonel Dangerfield did, and that is what his neighbors do not understand."

"He went right ahead from the beginning. Bought acre after acre of land adjoining his, until now he owns a plantation of over two thousand acres, and has the reputation of being worth half a million."

"No doubt he got the money."

"How do you propose to proceed in the matter?"

"That I can't tell until I have carefully examined into the affair," the Lone Hand replied, thoughtfully.

"One thing is sure, if I can help you in your wooing by the use of this secret the government can go hang for all I care."

"Old fellow! I shall never forget your kindness!" exclaimed the young doctor as he warmly wrung the hand of the other.

"And then I have some other business in this section too, so by coming down here I kill two birds with one stone."

"There are a pair of rascals who have their headquarters somewhere in this neighborhood, of whom the sheriffs and town marshals of this region seem to stand in awe."

"I think I know the fellows by reputation, for I have heard many a tale of their exploits since coming to Blazing Star."

"Jack Smackover—Wildcat Jack, and Bill Cookinham—Big Black Bill?" the Lone Hand asked, questioningly.

"Yes, those are the two men, and a precious pair of rascals they are too, if only half the stories I have heard of them are true."

"I guess they are as big scoundrels as can be found anywhere in the Southwest, and that is saying a great deal, for I think we can match the world in desperadoes down in this region."

"The trouble is that a great many decent folks in Blazing Star are rather inclined to look upon these scoundrels in the light of heroes."

"Yes, and I don't doubt that a great many more aid and abet the rascals; but it is my task to hunt them down and I shall try hard to make a success out of it."

"If I can aid you, command me!"

Again the old pards shook hands.

CHAPTER X. THE ATTACK.

THE Dangerfield plantation was a lordly one, as the reader has probably supposed from the description which has been given of it.

The mansion, a low two-storied house, all verandas and wings, after the prevailing Southern fashion, had been entirely reconstructed since the war.

It stood on a knoll, on a point, around which swept the Red River, so that from the house a view of the river for many miles could be commanded.

The old negro-quarters, which had stood right in the rear of the mansion in the old time, had been swept away under the new order of things, and the hands now had a sort of a little village of their own about a quarter of a mile from the big house.

There were some forty hands employed regularly on the place, besides extra help in the pressing season of the year.

Colonel Dangerfield believed in stock, had a great number of head of all kinds, and was reported to raise as good animals as could be found in all the Southern country.

There were only four white men on the place besides Colonel Dangerfield himself.

Four overseers, two of whom lived in the mansion, and the others who were the "drivers," had their quarters near the negro cabins.

The two who sat at the colonel's table were both young Englishmen, Reginald and Robert Dunlip, of good family, but possessing little money, they had come to the States to push their fortunes.

Both were excellent farmers, and as they had had a couple of years' experience in the South before coming to the colonel, they were well posted in regard to how a plantation should be run.

The colonel, being both old and indolent, was well suited with the young men, for he soon saw that they could manage affairs far better than he could.

There was one thing about the matter that he didn't like though.

The two brothers knew their value and demanded liberal pay.

And the colonel, after debating with them for a long time, was at last forced to come to their terms.

But it was sorely against his grain to pay such wages, for these young men received double the sum usually paid to overseers, although in his heart he knew that they were well worth the amount they received.

Then a brilliant idea seized upon the veteran. After the active life he had led he found that time hung heavily on his hands, now that the

necessity for active supervision on his part was removed.

To pass the idle hours away, and at the same time get even with the two young Englishmen for demanding such high wages, he gave them an introduction into the delights of the scientific game known as "poker," it being his idea to win back at cards some of the money which he was forced to pay to the two.

The Dunlips came of good old English sporting blood, and they took as readily to the game as a duck does to water.

Every night, after the supper was dispatched, the three sat down with a liberal allowance of good wine and prime cigars and played poker until bedtime.

The "ante" was fixed at a small amount so it was not possible for any one in the game to either win or lose a large sum.

It was not gambling—only card-playing for amusement, with a small sum staked upon the issue so as to render the game interesting.

At first the deep-laid plan of the old soldier succeeded to perfection.

Steadily he won all the small sums that the two young men had in their pockets when they sat down to play, and at the end of each week Colonel Dangerfield chuckled as he counted his gains, and calculated that he was thus shrewdly equalizing matters.

For a couple of months only this lasted, and then the young men, gradually becoming good players, managed to hold their own with the veteran, so he was not able to "equalize" matters any longer, but still the pleasure of the game continued, although the colonel now had to exert himself to hold his own.

And on this night when we introduce the reader to the Dangerfield mansion the three were comfortably seated in the colonel's library, which was a large apartment on the first floor in the east wing of the house, with French windows, as they are termed, extending to the floor so they can be used as doors, leading to a veranda from which a view of the lower part of the river could be had.

It was about ten o'clock, nearly bedtime, for neither the colonel nor the young Englishman kept late hours, and the three were deep in the mysteries of "poker."

The colonel had been extremely successful this evening, much to his satisfaction.

And when the older brother, Reginald, with a look at his watch, suggested that it was nearly time for them to retire, the veteran remarked:

"Well, gentlemen, we will have one more round so as to give you a chance to get even, for I really feel ashamed to clean you out so completely as I have this evening."

And, by the by, we have not described the three yet.

The colonel, in all respects, looked like the veteran soldier that he was.

Fully six feet in height and massively built in proportion, with iron-gray hair, streaming in long ringlets down behind his ears, and a full beard of the same hue, gray eyes, keen and sharp, he was a fine picture of a warrior.

All he needed was a suit of armor to make him a perfect representation of the demigod hero of the age of fable.

The young Englishmen bore a striking resemblance to each other.

Both had light hair and little "mutton-chop" whiskers of the same hue, blue eyes, and round, ruddy faces, and a judge of nationalities would have immediately picked them out for Britons as far as he could have seen them.

"Really, I must say, colonel, you have had the most astonishing run of good luck to-night that I think I ever saw!" Reginald exclaimed.

"Luck!" cried the colonel.

"Yes, luck; never saw anything like it, you know!"

"Upon my word, I think it has been really wonderful!" cried the younger brother.

"Oh, no, gentlemen, not luck, you know; calculation—skill and science, that is what has done the business."

"Oh, no, no, colonel!" cried both brothers in protest.

"Of course you don't want to admit it," the colonel remarked, pluming himself over his victory.

"It is easy enough to say that it is in the cards—luck is everything, because if you didn't say that, you would have to admit that I out-generaled you, and of course, I know how hard it is for any one to make that admission."

"A man may hold the best hand in the world but if he don't know how to play it, he can't win."

"That's very true," the elder of the brothers admitted.

"But the best player in the world can't win, you know, if his adversary has the better cards."

"Well, skill sometimes wins battles," the general remarked as he dealt the cards.

"By the way, what time will the hands be back?"

There was a political meeting with a barbecue, an ox roasted whole—at the Cross Roads, and almost all the people about within ten miles, both white and black had gone.

"Not before one or two o'clock in the morning," Reginald replied.

"Have they all gone?" the colonel asked.

"Every soul, including the overseers, and, in fact all the house servants have gone too, excepting Old Uncle Nick and he's too lame to walk the distance."

"Well, there's your cards, gentlemen, go for 'em!" The announcement had hardly left the colonel's lips when the nearest window to the table, which looked on the veranda flew open suddenly and four heavily-bearded men, with cocked revolvers in their hands, glided into the room.

CHAPTER XI.

DESPERATE MEASURES.

THE card-players were taken completely by surprise, for it was apparent the moment the intruders made their appearance that they "meant business," to use the western saying.

The upper part of their faces were covered with a black half-mask, and from under the masks came the huge, husky beards.

Their persons were concealed by rubber ponchos so that little could be seen of the lower part of their bodies excepting big boots, into which their pantaloons were tucked.

Upon their heads they wore broad-brimmed slouch hats, pulled well down over their eyes.

Three of them were big men while the other was rather below the medium in size: it was plain though that he was one of the principal ones of the ruffians, for it was he that led the advance into the room.

His beard and hair, which were rough and shaggy, were black in hue.

The second man had tawny-colored hair and beard, the third, black like the first, and the fourth, red hair and a bushy beard of the same hue.

The inmates of the room were completely at the mercy of the intruders, although all of the three had revolvers in their pistol-pockets; the two Englishmen had been long enough in the country to acquire the habit of carrying weapons, and it is not an unnecessary practice either as some might suppose, not well acquainted with the wild and lawless men who are frequently to be met with in the thinly settled country along the upper Red River.

To repeat the old joke, "a man might live on upper Red River for twenty years and not need a weapon, but when he did need one he needed it bad."

But what chance had any one of the three to get at their weapons, "covered" as they were with the cocked and leveled revolver of the desperadoes?

"Don't go fur to move! don't go fur to attempt fur to draw a weapon or we'll plug you as full of holes as a pepper-box!" growled the medium-sized, black-bearded man in a husky voice.

"Well, strangers, I reckon this is a regular surprise party," the veteran soldier remarked, accepting the situation with all the coolness of a man who had passed through so many exciting adventures that one more or less could not trouble him.

"To work!" commanded the tawny-bearded man, and his companions, evidently instructed beforehand in regard to what they had to do, advanced with him toward the table where the three players sat.

The tawny-beard covered the colonel with his weapon, the big man with the black beard did the like with the elder brother, and the red-bearded ruffian menaced the younger one, while the medium-sized outlaw produced three small coils of rope, about as thick as a man's little finger, from under his poncho.

"Do not attempt to offer resistance, or it will cost you your life," said the tawny-beard, who was evidently the leader of the party.

He spoke in rough, husky tones, evidently trying to disguise his voice.

"Hold out your hands so my pard kin tie you up for a while."

The three prisoners obeyed, and the ruffian who had been intrusted with the task of tying the captives advanced with the ropes.

"See hyer, strangers, this is a mighty risky piece of business that you are going into," the colonel warned.

"Some one of the boys are apt to step in hyer at any time, and it will not take them long to raise an alarm that will bring so many of the hands hyer that you can't hope to fight 'em."

"Now, kurnel, don't try for to lay it on so thick, or mebbe you will scare us right out of our boots," the leader of the outlaw band exclaimed in mockery.

"Do you take us for a pack of durned idiots? If you do, you never made a bigger mistake in your life."

"Do you s'pose that we don't know that 'bout every soul on yer durned ole plantation is off to the barbecue?"

"And that is the reason why we picked out this particular night for to make our call."

"We want to put our business through without being interrupted."

"So we reckoned we would make the raffle this time, taking advantage of the absence of your hands."

"Why, we have got everything working so well to-night that we might set your old shanty

on fire, and nobody would be able to get hyer in time to stop it.

"Oh, we are posted, kurnel, and you mustn't attempt to pull the wool over our eyes, for we won't have it.

"Go ahead with your work, C."

Thus commanded, the ruffian with the ropes immediately proceeded to bind each one of the three men, doing the task in a most workman-like manner.

First he fastened their wrists together with one end of the rope, then took the other end and lashed their legs at the ankles, and then passed the rope around their middles, fastening them to the chairs.

When the job was completed the leader commanded:

"Go through 'em and git their wealth."

The execution of this command did not produce as much plunder as the outlaws had expected, for none of the party were in the habit of carrying much money on their persons.

Even the colonel had only some forty odd dollars.

There were about fifty dollars on the table, though, the stakes of the poker game, and this the marauders secured.

The chief observing, with a horse-laugh, as his confederate gathered in the spoils:

"I reckon I hold the best hand that this poker game has seen to-night, three Jacks and two revolvers."

The ruffian who had acted as searcher had produced an old grain-bag before examining the victims, and into this all the spoils were cast.

The fellow had taken pains to remove the weapons carried by the captives, too, and they had also gone into the grain-bag.

"This ain't much plunder!" the outlaw chief exclaimed in a dissatisfied way.

"Three such men as you are ought to have panned out better than this."

"If you had only sent us word that you were coming," observed the colonel with elaborate politeness, "we might have been able to have prepared ourselves so we could have rewarded your labor better."

"Oh, don't you worry about that; we will strike a big enuff stake afore we get through, or know the reason why!" the outlaw chief replied, and it was plain to the captives that there was a decided menace in his tone.

"Now, boyees, h'ist these two young chaps out of this, so we kin talk to the kurnel without being obliged to whisper."

At this new move the Englishmen cast wondering glances at each other, as much as to ask what the marauders were about to do.

The colonel, however, sat like a statue, just as if he seemed to be troubled by the threats of the intruders.

The two big men, the black and red beards, lifted the two brothers, chairs and all, one after the other, and carried them into the adjoining room, and with them the black-bearded man remained, so as to keep watch and prevent them from freeing themselves from their bonds.

The red-beard returned to the library.

"Now, then, we are coming right down to business," said the chief of the marauders, after the red-beard had returned.

"And I want you to understand, Kurnel Dangerfield, right in the beginning, that we are in dead earnest, and we mean to have what we come arter, so, like Capt'n Scott's coon, you had better come down."

"Upon my word, stranger, I haven't the least idea what you are talking about," replied the veteran, with perfect *sang froid*.

"Oh, I'll spit it out right soon. We have come arter that leetle hundred thousand dollars in gold that you got out of Jeff Davis's army-chest!"

The announcement came upon the colonel so unexpectedly, that for a moment he could not help showing traces of amazement.

But it was only for a second, though, and then he laughed.

"Stranger, I reckon you are a leetle too much for me," he said.

"Yes, I reckon I am, and you will find it out afore I git through with you!"

"Whar's that gold?"

"Say! who has been stuffing you with this yarn?" the old soldier exclaimed, contemptuously.

"Oh, it isn't the truth, then; you didn't get the gold out of the chest that you and Major Morrissey buried in the swamp near the Mississippi."

The colonel was on his guard now and did not betray any emotion at the mention of the name, although there was a wandering look in his eyes as though he was speculating as to how the outlaw had gained his information.

"It seems to me that the yarn is a pretty tough one," he remarked.

"Oh, no, it ain't; and I've gone through the thing from beginning to end," the outlaw replied.

"After the war ended, you made your way back to the spot where you buried the chest, as soon as possible.

"You bought a covered wagon in the neighborhood, making out that you was an emigrant going West, and then you got the chest, stowed

it away in your wagon with a lot of other plunder, so as to hide it, and brought it here.

"Oh, I've been smelling you out; when you first began to fix up your place, you went down to New Orleans and got a lot of gold changed there, saying it was some you had buried at the beginning of the war.

"And, as far as I can find out, you must have a big lot of it still on hand, so I've made up my mind to get it."

"Stranger, I am afraid you will be disappointed," the colonel replied, as cool as a cucumber.

"You will find no gold hyer."

"No, I don't expect I will, but I reckon you will find some for me."

"Oh, no."

"Do you think I can't make you?" cried the ruffian, angrily.

"I do!" replied the veteran, as firm as a rock.

CHAPTER XII.

AN UNEXPECTED EVENT.

THE outlaw chief was irritated by this prompt and firm reply.

Advancing so near the old soldier that he could touch him simply by reaching out his hand, the masked marauder drew his bowie-knife and flashed the blade before the eyes of the colonel.

"Do you see that bit of cold steel?" he exclaimed.

"Oh, yes, I am in full possession of my eyesight, thank heaven!" the veteran replied, tranquilly.

"Well, you won't be arter I git through with you," retorted the outlaw, with savage menace.

"Oh, bosh! you cannot frighten me with your threats!" the old soldier answered.

"You can but kill anyway; that is all you can do, and I have met death face to face too often in my life to tremble at his threatened approach now."

"That's something worse than death!" warned the ruffian.

"Is there?"

"Yes, torture."

Colonel Dangerfield laughed contemptuously.

"Oh, come, come, stranger, this will not do, you know!" he exclaimed.

"You really mustn't make the mistake of thinking I am a child who can be scared by threats."

"And this whole idea is so ridiculous, too."

"Why, man alive, if I had the gold, do you suppose I would keep it here in the house?"

"That's jist exactly what I think," replied the ruffian.

"But the idea is ridiculous! I could find a much safer place for it."

"Oh, yes, that is true enough, but it lies in your breed to hoard up money. Didn't your father do it?"

"After his sudden death wasn't his money found hidden away in all sorts of queer places?"

"Didn't you 'bout rip the house to pieces afore you were satisfied that you had got the whole on it?"

Colonel Dangerfield looked annoyed.

This was the truth and no man knew it better than he.

It was evident, too, from the masked marauder's familiarity with the subject that he was no stranger in the neighborhood, as the veteran had at first supposed.

"Well, you will not find any money hidden away in this house," Dangerfield said, shortly.

"Kurnel, I reckon you are going to force me to adopt some unpleasant measures," the outlaw remarked, in a way that boded no good to the captive.

"I didn't want to put the screws on you, you know, 'cuz I hate to have to do that sort of thing. I allers like to get along as easily as possible; but we have taken some trouble to arrange this little ripple, and we didn't intend to vamose without gitting what we came for."

"Now, for the last time, I ask you fair and easy: will you tell us whar you have hidden this gold, so we kin git our paws onto it?"

"Stranger, you are welcome to all the gold you can scare up in this ranch," Colonel Dangerfield replied, speaking in the calmest and most deliberate manner.

"But as to my telling you where it is, you mustn't expect me to do impossibilities."

"I cannot give you what I haven't got."

"Kurnel, during the war, did you ever hear of the rough tricks that some of the Arkansas boys played on men whom they believed to have money stowed away, and who wouldn't shell out when they were asked?"

"Yes, I believe I did hear of a few cases where the outlaws of whom you speak subjected their victims to the most fiendish tortures, but, if my memory serves me right, in only one or two instances did the ruffians succeed in getting any plunder, and in almost every case the men who did the hellish work were caught and hanged, as they richly deserved to be."

"Waal, I wasn't hanged," the marauder retorted.

"Or if I was I have managed to come to life again."

"Maybe you will not escape so fortunately the next time," Colonel Dangerfield observed, with marked significance.

"I reckon we ain't skeered to run our chances on that."

"But come, we are wasting time with all this chin-music."

"We must come down to business. Will you give us the gold?"

"I can't give you what I hav'n't got, as I told you before."

"Then I will have to put you through a course of sprouts, which will be mighty sart'in to make you squeal, for all your nerve!"

"You had better take time to reflect before you proceed to violence," warned the old soldier.

"Oh, we ain't rushed into this hyer matter with our eyes shut; you kin bet high on that!" the ruffian asserted.

"You will be certain to pay dearly for it, for the wild and lawless war times are over now, and all the country will be up in arms to hunt you down when the details of this affair become known."

"Oh, you can't skeer us with any sich talk!" the masked marauder declared.

"We have come for the gold and we are going to have it, and since you ain't inclined to listen to reason, and tell us where it is, we will be forced to see if we can't make you speak."

"We can't come the same dodge as the gay boys in the war time used to work, 'cos the means ain't handy."

"They used to roast their man over a good, hot fire, until he was glad to sing out that he had enough."

Colonel Dangerfield shut his teeth firmly together, and faced his captors with a resolute look.

It was no idle tale that the ruffians had told in regard to the method that the desperadoes had used during the stirring times of the war to make the man whom they had selected as a victim tell where he had hidden his money away.

In the wild Southwestern region, remote from banks, or any facilities for the safe-keeping of money, it was, and is, a common custom for the men who have money to hide it away.

This was well known to the lawless men who, under pretense of taking arms either for or against their country, made their uniform a cloak to mask dark deeds of rapine.

The reader, we trust, will not think we are overdrawing the picture we are giving of this nocturnal raid of the masked desperadoes, for in truth it is not so.

We might give a still worse account, and yet have the records of history to back us up in the assertion that we have not painted the picture too darkly.

It is a historical fact that during the last year of the war, a party of soldiers belonging to the Union Army—to a Kansas regiment, I think, if my memory serves me right, and, headed by the chaplain—of all men, the last to be mixed up in such a crime—seized a rich farmer who was supposed to have a store of gold hidden away, and deliberately roasted him over a fire until he confessed where his money was stored.

It is a satisfaction to chronicle that these atrocious villains were all caught, promptly tried, convicted and hanged by the military authorities.

As well as any man could possibly know, the veteran colonel understood that he was in the hands of desperadoes who would not be apt to hesitate at any means to accomplish their object; but with all the firmness of the red-skinned warrior, who, tied to the stake, beholds the fagots heaped around him, preparatory to lighting the fire by means of which he is to die a death of torture, sees his enemies dancing in triumph around him, and yet in place of quailing at the sight, laughs in the face of his hated foes, and coolly chants his death-songs, so Colonel Dangerfield defied the men who had made him a captive.

He would not speak though it cost him his life.

"The last chance—the last chance, remember!" cried the outlaw leader, brandishing his glittering knife before the eyes of the veteran.

"Don't think we are only fooling with you for we ain't."

"We mean it—we mean business every time!"

"Tell us whar you have hidden the gold, or we'll torture you in sich a way that in your agony you will be glad to have death come for to relieve you of your misery!"

"I am a veteran soldier and have periled my life for my country on many a battle-field and no man ever yet accused me of showing the white feather!" exclaimed the old soldier, his voice firm and resolute.

"And now after all these years if you think I am going to play the craven and the coward at the bidding of a ruffianly scoundrel who will some day justly dangle at the end of a rope, you are most infernally mistaken!"

"Jefferson Dangerfield is no such man!"

"Go ahead with your bird's eggging! You can but kill, and to my thinking there are some things in this world worse than death."

"Waal we'll try you, anyway!" cried the out-

law chief, angrily, irritated by the bold defiance.

"We will put your courage to the test, and since you are so fond of talking about hanging we will give you a taste of the rope and see how you will enjoy it.

"C, throw the noose over the head of this old sinner, and then we'll hang him to one of his own doors!

"I reckon that if we pass the rope over the top of the door we can hang you as well as on any tree in the land.

"You miserable scoundrels!" foamed Colonel Dangerfield, almost purple in the face with rage.

"You will not dare to commit such an outrage!"

"Oh, won't we?" sneered the masked marauder.

"Now, don't you think for a moment that we are going to fool with you in this matter.

"I mean every word I have said.

"We are after the gold and we are going to have it too.

"We will choke the secret out of you!

"We will run you up to the door and let you hang there until your head swims, then we'll let you down and give you a chance to speak.

"If you won't, we'll run you up again and repeat the dose until you either tell us what your gold is or we choke the life out of you.

"Go ahead, C."

Obedient to the command the outlaw with the rope advanced and cast the noose over the colonel's head.

The old man started to his feet, and then, with a groan, sunk back in the chair.

Jefferson Dangerfield was dead.

CHAPTER XIII.

RUTHLESS DESTRUCTION.

COLONEL DANGERFIELD had been subject to heart-disease for some time, and the present excitement had proved fatal.

"The old scoundrel has fainted!" cried the outlaw chief.

"Let's run him up to the door and choke the faint out of him," suggested the ruffian who held the rope, and who had been addressed as C.

"Maybe that would be a good plan," observed the red-beard.

"Mighty big fighting-man, he is, to faint like a girl at the sight of danger," sneered the chief of the outlaws, as he advanced to the side of Dangerfield.

"I reckon, though, we had better bring him out of the faint afore we go ahead with the rest of the programme," he continued.

Then he took a good look at the drooping head of the colonel.

"By Heaven! boys, the man is dead," he cried excitedly.

"Dead!" echoed the others.

And then for a few moments a solemn hush fell upon the three, and earnestly they gazed upon each other.

They were astounded by this unexpected occurrence.

The outlaw chief was the first to break the silence.

"Yes, he's dead, sure enough!"

"It don't seem possible!" said red-beard.

"Put your hand on his heart and see if there is any sign of life there," replied the leader.

The other did as he was bid, held his hand there for a moment, and then withdrew it, shaking his head as he did so.

"Well, any sign of life?" asked the chief, speaking now in what was evidently his natural tone.

"No, the heart has ceased to beat."

"What did I tell you?"

"But, I say, Cap, what on earth killed the man?" asked the outlaw who still held the end of the rope in his hand.

"The excitement was too much for him. He was probably subject to heart disease or something of that kind," the chief answered.

"Mebbe so; it must be some kind of a natural death, 'cos we didn't do anything to him, except to talk, and I reckon from what I know of the kurnel he wasn't the kind of man who could be skeered to death by words."

"It appears to me as if this was about as unlucky a thing as could have happened," the red-bearded outlaw observed, reflectively.

"Yes, it is," the chief assented.

"What's gwine to be done?" asked the man who had been termed C, and whom the attentive reader has probably ere this recognized as Wildcat Jack.

"Upon my word I am bothered," the marauder chief confessed.

"We will have to deliberate over the matter, for this unexpected death of the colonel has totally upset all our arranged plans.

"There wasn't much doubt in my mind, boys, as I told you, that we could make the colonel weaken when we came to the hanging business, but the old son of a gun has beat us completely by kicking the bucket in this entirely unexpected way."

"Yes; and now it seems to me the odds are about a million to one that we will not be able to find the hiding-place of the gold," the red-bearded ruffian observed, in a disconsolate tone.

"Well, yes, it does look a little that way," said the chief.

"And we have had all our trouble for nothing!" Wildcat Jack cried, in disgust.

"Oh, no, not quite so bad as that; we have picked up about a hundred dollars, and that will pay us for all the trouble we have taken.

"But now we must set our wits to work about this gold," the marauder chief continued.

"It does not seem possible that the man hid the gold away without making some provision so that it could be found in case of his death."

The others jumped eagerly at this idea.

"No, of course not!" red-beard exclaimed.

"You bet he didn't!" Wildcat Jack cried, emphatically.

"The kurnel was a right smart business man, and no mistake!"

"This is his library," remarked the outlaw captain, as he glanced around him, "and if any papers exist, containing an account of the hiding-place of the gold, it will be likely to be in this room, I think."

"Sure as ye're born!" Wildcat Jack assented.

"Yes, there isn't much doubt in regard to that in my opinion, and there is a safe yonder," said the third marauder, directing attention to a small, old-fashioned safe standing in one corner of the room.

"That is our game, I reckon!"

Then the three hurried to examine the safe, but, to their disappointment, found it was securely locked.

"Of course; we might have known it would be locked," the chief remarked.

"People don't generally allow safes containing valuables to remain open."

"Maybe the gold is in thar," suggested Wildcat Jack, eagerly.

"Oh, no," replied the captain, and the red-bearded man also shook his head in token of dissent.

"Not the least chance of that," continued the chief.

"The colonel was too smart a man to put his treasure in a place where the first robber who managed to get into the house would be sure to look for valuables.

"No; when I spoke I referred to papers, legal documents, and such things, which a man would be apt to keep in a safe."

"Oh, yes; I understand now," Wildcat Jack remarked.

"Now, if the colonel has put down the hiding-place of his gold in writing, the chances are, it seems to me, that it would be in his will or some paper of that kind."

The others nodded to imply that they agreed with the speaker.

"And any legal document of that nature would probably be in this safe."

"But he would have to have a lawyer to draw out his will," red-beard suggested.

"Do you think it likely that he would make known such a secret to any one?"

"Oh, no, he need not have troubled a lawyer. A great many men draw out their wills themselves.

"One thing you can gamble on, and that is the colonel never allowed anybody to know anything about the gold."

"The dog-goned safe is locked as tight as a drum!" Wildcat Jack exclaimed, who had been examining the article while the other was speaking.

"Oh, we can get into it easily enough; the safe is one of the old-fashioned kind, without the modern improvements, and a man who understands how to do the trick can get at the contents without any trouble," the outlaw chief answered.

"Mebbe you have a key that will fit," Wildcat Jack observed, whose knowledge in regard to safes was extremely slight.

"Oh, yes; I've a key that will unlock any safe of this kind," the other replied.

Then he drew from his pocket a small powder flask, hunted up a piece of string, which, with the aid of damp powder, he transformed into a quick match.

Then, after the most approved fashion known to the professors of the art of "safe-cracking," he introduced the powder into the lock and fired it with the aid of his quick match, much to the astonishment of his friends, who looked on in wonder, for neither one of them had ever seen anything of the kind before.

The result of this clever piece of work was to blow the door of the safe open.

As the outlaw chief had remarked, the safe was an old-fashioned one, and the modern burglar, with his scientific way of dealing with such things, could get into the interior of such an iron box without much more trouble than if it had been made of wood.

The anticipations of the marauder leader in regard to the contents of the safe were correct.

There wasn't any gold in the safe, or other valuables of a like nature, only old papers, receipts, insurance policies, business letters, leases, contracts, etc., such as a man who was carrying on an extensive plantation like Colonel Dangerfield would be apt to collect.

But, despite the most exhaustive search no document at all resembling a will, or any paper

containing any reference to the gold could they find.

The search took some time, for the outlaw chief was careful to examine in the closest manner every paper in the safe.

After the explosion had taken place he had remarked how lucky it was that they had selected a night for their attempt when all the hands were away, and when he proceeded to examine the papers, further said that there was plenty of time for the work, as the hands would not be apt to be home from the meeting until after midnight.

In utter disgust the outlaw chief threw down the last of the documents.

"The infernal old scoundrel has beaten us after all!" he exclaimed.

"There isn't the slightest clew here to the gold!"

"What is to be done? There must be a memorandum in regard to the hiding-place of the treasure somewhere!" red-beard asserted.

"Yes, it doesn't seem possible that the colonel didn't make any provision so that the money could be got at in the event of his sudden death.

"Still, he may have reckoned, like many another man, that there would be plenty of time to say something about the matter when he felt that death was near, and he isn't the first one by a long shot who has slipped up on that calculation."

"The jig is up then?" Wildcat Jack observed.

"I reckon it is, and we had better be off," and the outlaw chief rose to his feet, a bunch of letters in his hand.

"Here's some epistles that the colonel wrote to his lawyer about a lawsuit which I was mixed up in 'bout ten years ago, and I'm going to carry them off, to read at my leisure, for I have never quite got it through my hair how my side got beaten in the fight, but I reckon these letters will clear the thing up, though."

"Let me see, Judge Gayaway Labodot, of Richmond, is his lawyer, I believe," red-beard remarked, a thoughtful expression on his face.

"Yes, the judge has always acted for him."

"Isn't thar a chance that this hyer paper we are arter may be in the judge's possession?"

"Yes, that's so; I didn't think of that," the chief observed, thoughtfully.

"I reckon thar is a right smart chance that the judge may have the document—sealed up, you know, so that no one can get at the contents until after Colonel Dangerfield's death."

"And now that the colonel is dead, the thing will come to light."

"We will take care to look after that!" exclaimed the chief, impressively.

"We will make a call on the judge to-morrow night, and if he has any papers belonging to Colonel Dangerfield we will make him fork them over."

"Call D, and we'll vamoze!"

"How about the prisoners?" Wildcat Jack inquired.

"Oh, leave them just as they are; we mustn't give them any chance to get on our trail."

Big Black Bill, who was the guard over the prisoners, was summoned, and then the nocturnal intruders departed as quietly as they had come."

CHAPTER XIV.

A DREADFUL CATASTROPHE.

THERE had been only a few words exchanged between the two young Englishmen and Big Black Bill after the pair had been conveyed into the room adjoining the library and the outlaw placed on guard over them.

"Now you jist want to sit still and not attempt to make any disturbance," the ruffian continued, "'cos I'm a mighty nervous man and this hyer revolver is a hair-trigger we'pon—goes with so light a pull, you know, that a baby could make it bark; so, if you excite me at all, it is jist as likely as not that I'd shoot both on you afore I would know what I was about."

"I have given you fair warning so if you git plugged, you won't have anybody to blame but yourselves."

"Oh, that is all right," Reginald took upon himself to reply.

"We will not give you the least trouble. We are wise enough to know when we get into a bad box and have sense enough to endeavor to make the best of it."

"That's the talk!" the ruffian rejoined.

But when the explosion took place—the blowing open of the safe door—the brothers could not refrain from expressing their surprise, and even the outlaw himself was amazed.

Neither one of the three could imagine what it was.

The dull, deadened sound of the powder, stuffed into the lock, and, when fired, exerting its strength upon the door, was so different from the sharp, quick report of a firearm that all guessed that no weapon had been discharged, but what had produced the sound was beyond their power to explain.

"What in thunder is that, anyway?" Big Black Bill growled.

"Sounds like an explosion of some sort—more like the noise of a blast though than the report of a weapon," Reginald observed.

"Oh, decidedly, you know, it didn't come from a weapon!" the other brother exclaimed.

"Wa-al, I reckon I should allow myself that it ain't the report of no weapon."

And then they all listened intently, but as no other sound came from the library they were left in the dark as to the cause of the noise.

No more conversation took place between the three until Big Black Bill was summoned by his companions.

"Wa-al, so-long, boys, see you ag'in, some time, mebbe," the ruffian observed, as he retreated from the room.

The brothers looked at each other in disgust, but they did not vouchsafe any remark until they felt sure that their guard was out of hearing.

"Well, I am not anxious to see the big, black-bearded scoundrel again," Reginald remarked.

"I differ with you; I should really like to see him again," Robert remarked.

"You would?"

"Yes, I would go two miles to see—ay, twenty, and walk every step of the way!"

"To see this infernal ruffian?"

"Yes, to see him hanged!"

"Ay, ay, I agree with you there."

And then there was silence for a few minutes, the brothers listening intently to see if they could detect whether the unwelcome visitors had departed yet or not.

And as they couldn't hear a sound, they came to the conclusion that the marauders had taken their leave.

"I say, old fellow," said Reginald, "I think the rascals have you, don't you?"

"Yes, I do."

"They might at least have had the decency to take these durned cords off."

"By Jove! do you know I feel for all the world like a turkey trussed for roasting!"

"Yes, so do I, and the fellow bound me so tightly that the cords are beginning to cut into my wrists and ankles."

"Oh, don't talk of it!" Reginald exclaimed, completely disgusted.

"It is the same way with me, and I am full of pains and aches from the crown of my head to the soles of my feet."

"Reggy, old chappie, we have been quite a time in America, but we never got into any such scrape as this before."

"That was because we have never been in such a darned rough country before," the elder brother answered.

"You know we have always heard bad reports of this Upper Red River country, but as the colonel was willing to come to our terms, and it was a better engagement than we could procure elsewhere, I thought we would risk it."

"I say, Reggy, why do you suppose the rascals brought us into this room?"

"To separate us from Colonel Dangerfield."

"Yes, I know, but why did they wish to do that, eh?"

"'Pon my word, old fellow, you are too much for me now."

"But I do wish some one would come—I am feeling so deuced uncomfortable."

"It is evident that the rascals have vamped, as they would call it," the younger brother remarked after listening intently for a few moments.

"Yes, there's not a sound, and I suppose we will have to remain here just as we are until the servants return from their deuced festival."

"Confound the black rascals! If they hadn't all rushed off to that merrymaking, the scoundrels would never have been able to surprise the house."

"I have a knife in my pocket," Robert remarked after a few moments' silence, during which he had been thinking deeply.

"And the big blade opens very easily. Now I have been thinking that—although we can't walk nor get away from the chairs, yet, by throwing ourselves over sideways we might be able to hitch along the floor to each other, and then, if you could manage to get the knife out of my pocket, perhaps you could hold it so I could open it with my teeth, and when it was open I could saw my cord against the knife-blade until it parted."

"Capital!" immediately exclaimed Reginald, who had no doubt that the feat could be accomplished.

"I tell you what it is, Bobby, my boy, you have got a great head on your shoulders."

"We can do it, my tulip! and then, after we are free we can release Colonel Dangerfield, ride at once to Blazing Star, give the alarm, raise a force, give instant chase to these black-muzzled scoundrels and, perhaps, be able to capture them before they can find a hiding-place."

"Old fellow, at what a pace you travel!" exclaimed the other.

"It is a wonder that you didn't have the scoundrels tried by Judge Lynch and hung before you got through."

"I don't doubt they will be when they are captured, but let us try our scheme."

"Agreed."

And then the two young men threw themselves on the floor, carrying the chair, to which they were attached, with them.

In snake-like fashion they wriggled along the floor until they came together.

Reginald, after considerable trouble, got his hand into his brother's pocket and drew out the knife, then held it while his brother opened the blade with his teeth.

After this feat was accomplished, the elder brother held the knife as firmly as he could, while the younger rubbed the cord which bound his wrists against the knife-blade.

The cord was a tough and strong one, and it took considerable time for the knife to sever it.

The task was performed at last, though, and the moment it was accomplished and Robert's hands were free, it only took a few minutes for him to remove the rest of the lashings and to set Reginald at liberty.

It was with a great deal of satisfaction that the brothers found themselves free again.

"By Jove, old fellow, I hope that I will never again get into such a deuced box as that while I live!" Reginald exclaimed.

And then Robert, sniffing the air, suddenly cried:

"I say, Reggy, this room is full of smoke."

And it was the truth.

There was no light in the apartment, but all objects were distinctly visible, for the broad beams of the full moon shone in through the windows.

The smoke had commenced to creep into the room just after the time when the brothers set to work to free themselves, but they had been so occupied by their task that they had not noticed the fact.

"By Jove! you are right, old fellow! What does it mean?"

"Can it be possible that the house is on fire?" cried the younger brother in alarm.

"It may be that those scoundrels have fired the building."

"The smoke comes from that room."

"The colonel will be burnt to death!"

And then the two brothers rushed to the door.

The moment they opened it a cloud of thick smoke poured out in their faces, and they were driven back.

The whole interior of the room was in flames, and there, fastened to his chair, just as the ruffians left him, was Colonel Dangerfield, right in the center of the blaze.

The young men saw at a glance that the colonel was dead, and comprehended, too, that any attempt to rescue the body from the flames would only result in their own destruction.

The truth was plain to them.

Colonel Dangerfield had been murdered by the masked ruffians, and then they had set fire to the house.

CHAPTER XV.

OLD UNCLE NICK.

For a moment the two young men stood horror-stricken by the fearful sight, for when they had hurried to rescue Colonel Dangerfield from the peril which encompassed him, they had not the slightest suspicion that any misfortune beyond being made captive by the robbers had befallen him.

The steady advance of the flames soon caused the young men to think about securing their own safety.

"There's no hope of doing anything for the poor old colonel," the elder brother exclaimed, with a groan.

"No, no; he is stone dead! You can see that plainly enough, and though I should like to save his body from the flames, yet it is not possible."

"To make the attempt would only be to sacrifice our own lives. Let us get out before it is too late!"

The speaker was right; the other felt the truth of the words, and so did not attempt to gainsay him.

The flames had gained such a headway that it is doubtful if even the full force of a well-organized metropolitan fire department could have saved the mansion, which was fully fifty years old, perfectly dry, and burned like so much timber.

By means of the window the two brothers made their escape.

There was no time—no chance for them to attempt to save anything from the house, for the moment the young men opened the door leading into the apartment, it gave the flames the air they needed, and with almost incredible quickness they wrapped the house in their fiery embraces.

The young Englishman retired to a safe distance, and gazed with sad eyes upon the scene.

The death of their employer and the destruction of his property deeply affected them.

Although they had not been with Colonel Dangerfield but a few months, yet they had learned to esteem their employer, for despite his rather overbearing way, he was a gentleman in every sense of the word, and tried to deal justly with all men, although his peculiarities sometimes caused those who were not well acquainted with him to fail to see his good qualities.

"By Jove! this is a terrible blaze, Bob!" said the elder brother, as he gazed with mournful eyes at the sad sight of the stately mansion being devoured by the fire-fiends.

"Yes, it is perfectly awful; and the poor old colonel, too—By Jove! Reggy, what a terrible fate!"

"Yes, the scoundrels murdered him, and then set the house on fire to hide the crime."

"The explosion that we heard, I suppose, denoted the time when the colonel was killed by the assassins."

"Undoubtedly," the younger brother assented; "but that fellow who kept guard over us evidently didn't know what the others were up to, because he was as much at a loss to account for the noise as we were."

"Unless he was shamming," suggested the other.

"Oh, no; I don't think he was shamming, you know. Why should he go to that trouble before us? He couldn't have had any idea, you know, that we would be able to get out of it."

"Oh, no; of course not. The miserable wretches intended to burn us alive!"

And both of the young men, although they had escaped the danger and were in safety now, fairly shuddered at the idea.

"Reggy, my boy, we owe something to the poor old colonel, you know!" exclaimed the younger brother, who was decidedly the most go-ahead of the two.

"Yes, yes, I understand; he was our employer, our friend, and we must avenge his death!"

"Yes, and we will, too, Reggy; we'll spend a good bit of money to help the authorities, and we will not spare ourselves personally, either."

"Indeed, we will not!"

And the two brothers shook hands.

Just at this point an old negro made his appearance.

He was an aged, white-headed fellow, a little lame; one of the old servants, who had been born on the Dangerfield plantation, formerly the property of Colonel Dangerfield's father, and had stuck to the old place all through the war.

That the struggle had made him a free man didn't make a particle of difference to him.

He considered that he belonged to "Massa Kunnel Dangerfiend" as much now as he ever did.

This was Old Uncle Nick—Old Nick, as the boys delighted to call him when they desired to rouse the wrath of the veteran.

He was the only servant on the place—as had been remarked to the colonel—who had not gone to the barbecue, his lameness keeping him home.

He came hobbling toward the young men from the direction of the river.

"Oh, bress der lam'! did anybody ebber see'd anything like dis hyer?" the old man cried with uplifted hands.

"An' dem scallywags, young Massas Dunlip, dem scallywags, wid de black kivers ober dere faces, dey's done gone and done it, I s'pose!"

"Yes, yes, Uncle Nick!" cried both the young men in a breath.

"I s'pect so; I s'pected dot dey was up to some mischief, when I see'd 'em a-makin' for de ribber, and den, when de fire dun broke out, I was sure of it!"

"And you saw the scoundrels?" anxiously inquired Reginald.

"Yes, sah, 'deed I did!" the old man cried promptly.

"I was down to de ribber settin' a catfish line, and while I was a-watching it de sleep come ober me an' I crept up in de bushes for to catch a nap."

"I done wake up, gemmen, jist in time to see dese four big scallywags, with dere faces all kivered with de black t'ings, git into de boat."

"I knowed dat dey was bad, gemmen, I know dat dey was right smart bad de moment I laid my own two-looking eyes on dem, and so dis yere old nig kept jist as quiet as de rabbit when he hops along in de bushes, an' kinder s'pects dat de bushy-tailed fox is somewhar 'round."

"I watch dem till dey got out ob sight, 'way down de ribber, an' den I jist laid back in de bushes dere an' did a heap o' thinkin' 'bout dis yere t'ing."

"And den de fu'st t'ing I know'd, I see'd dat de house was all on fire, an' den I know'd dat dem debbles had gone done it."

"Yes, the scoundrels fired the house," the elder Dunlip observed, sadly.

"An' de old massa, gemmen, whar is he?" inquired the negro, looking around him, anxiously, as though he expected to see Colonel Dangerfield somewhere in the neighborhood.

The brothers looked at each other and then they shook their heads.

The negro had been watching their faces, as the dog watches the expression on the features of his master, and as quick to catch the meaning of a look as the sagacious dog, the old man understood that some evil had happened to the colonel.

"Oh de good Lawd!" he wailed. "Don't say dat dem scallywags have done gone hurt Massa Kunnel!"

"It is the truth, Uncle Nick you will never see Colonel Dangerfield again," Reginald said, sadly.

"He is dead, killed by these masked villains who fired the house to conceal the evidence of their crime."

The old negro fell blubbering like a child.

"Dere nebber was a better massa in dis world dan de kurnel!" he moaned.

"My poor fellow, don't take on so," observed the Englishman, touched by the grief of the black.

"The colonel has gone to his reward—to his long home beyond the skies.

"But we can do something besides mourn for him—we can revenge his brutal and cowardly murder!"

The tears of the African ceased immediately and a wild, savage look came over his face.

"Yes, sah, dat's so! And I t'ink I know de men too—I know de scallywags dough dey did hab dere faces kivered!"

"Yes, sah, I kin pick some ob dem out, an' when I see'd de odders you kin jist bet four dollars, sah, dat I will be able to pick dem out."

"Ah, tell us their names!" cried Reginald, eagerly.

"No, Massa Dunlip, not now, sah, dis yere ain't de place. Wait! gib de old man time for to t'ink it ober."

"Musn't make no mistake, you know; wait till we git inter de town—inter Blazing Star an' de law coons take hol' of de t'ing; dea de ole man will make 'em open dere eyes."

The Englishmen looked at each other.

They hardly knew what to make of it.

The brothers had been long enough in the South to understand how utterly unreliable and worthless as a witness the average colored man is in a case of this kind.

How they delight to magnify their own importance, but when they get on the witness-stand, and a sharp lawyer takes them in hand, the result is generally like what follows sticking a pin into a balloon.

So in the present case; while neither one of the brothers doubted that the old negro *had* seen the nocturnal marauders—his speaking of the "kivers" which they wore over their faces aided to strengthen this impression—yet they were not at all sure he had recognized any of the party and would be able to denounce them to justice, as he declared he could do.

Again the Englishmen turned their attention to the flames.

The mansion was now one sheet of fire—a grand spectacle.

Then the wind began to come up. Great fiery showers of sparks were carried here and there, the sheds and outbuildings caught, then the trees in the neighborhood of the house, and then the cotton in the fields almost ready for the pickers, lastly the negro-quarters and farm buildings, although so distant, and when the hands arrived, which they did about twelve o'clock, attracted by the light of the fire, nearly all the Dangerfield Plantation was one sheet of flame.

The morning sun rose upon as complete a ruin as the eye of man had ever looked upon in that section.

The once smiling plantation was a barren waste.

CHAPTER XVI.

TELLING THE NEWS.

LOUD were the lamentations which ascended on the air when the "hands," found that they had not only lost all their little belongings, but were likely to be thrown out of employment too.

For it was well known that Colonel Dangerfield's heir was his daughter, a young miss, fresh from boarding-school, and it was almost certain, in their opinion, that the young lady would not attempt so great a task as to try to repair the ravages of the fire.

It was much more likely, they thought, that she would sell the place.

The two overseers, Mike Maloney, a big, bull-headed fellow, and Simon Farwell, a shrewd piece of Connecticut hardware, had talked the matter over quietly as soon as they realized the extent of the destruction; and as there were three months' wages due each of them, with the disposition, so general among common men, of looking out for themselves, no matter who else might suffer, they determined to take measures to secure their money.

"They said the kurnel was wurth half a million of dollars," Maloney observed to the other.

"So I have heard, but you can't allers tell," Farwell observed, with an oracular shake of the head.

"Oh, I know that. He may not be worth half-a-million of cents, for all we kin tell.

"One thing is sure, everything on the plantation, that is worth anything, is gone, buildings, stocks, crops, all played out, and it will take a small fortune to put the place in running order again."

"And do you think a young girl, right out of school, is likely to do anything of the kind?"

"Not much!" responded the other, decidedly.

"And I tell you what it is, pard, we must look out for ourselves!"

"I bet yer!"

"What do you say to going to Richmond—that is the county seat, you know—and putting an attachment on the place for our wages?"

"A bully good idee!"

"It is first come, first served in all matters of this kind you bet! and we want to be smart and

get in ahead, or else some one may come in with a big claim and gobble everything."

"That is so."

"Thar's no telling how the kurnel was fixed, you know, he may have a heap of debts that no one don't know nothing about, you see."

"Sure as you're born! Well, I'm with you for Richmond to-morrow."

And, to dispose of this matter now so that we will not again have to return to it, the fellows stuck to their resolution.

They went to the county seat in the morning, employed a lawyer to bring suit for their wages and clapped an attachment on the ruined plantation.

The result of this attack upon the credit of the dead man was, that as soon as it became noised abroad—and such news as this flies with wondrous speed—every soul to whom Colonel Dangerfield chanced to be indebted hastened to follow the example of the overseers, with the exception of the two young Englishmen, who did not move in the matter at all.

And when some busybody heard of this, and took the trouble to remonstrate with the brothers, telling them that they would be "left," Reginald as the elder, speaking for both, said with considerable heat:

"Look here, my friend, we are gentlemen, we are, not a couple of sharks."

"We don't know how Miss Margaret, the colonel's daughter, may be situated, and we do not intend to embarrass her in any way."

"But she may not be able to pay your claims—they say the estate will not pay the debts. What will you do then?"

"Well, in that case, if the lady is short of cash, I suppose Bobby and I will have to lend her a thousand or two until she has time to look around and pick herself up a bit, you know," was the Englishman's unexpected reply.

The busybody retired astounded, but got his revenge by reporting around town that the two Englishmen were crazy as bedbugs.

And now to resume the thread of our story.

In the morning the two brothers, accompanied by the old negro, went to Blazing Star.

Blazing Star boasted of two officials, although it was such a little place, a mayor and a town marshal.

The mayor, Mathew Richards by name, kept the principal store in the town.

Richards was a man of forty-five or thereabouts, a regular typical Southwesterner, although a little more fleshy than the usual Southwesterner is.

He stood nearly six feet high, with a long, oval face, keen gray eyes, yellow hair and chin-piece, both being, though, rather shorter than is the custom in the region.

The marshal, Brandon Gazee, was a man of about the same size and weight as the mayor, and looked something like him, although he had dark hair, and always kept his face smoothly shaven.

News of the tragedy had already reached the town when the Englishmen arrived, some of the plantation negroes having brought the tidings.

So both the mayor and the marshal were in the store of the former, which was situated next door to the hotel, when the brothers made their appearance. The Englishmen were acquainted with the town officials, though not intimately, and therefore were immediately greeted by them the moment they made their appearance.

"Glad to see you! glad to see you!" said the mayor, shaking hands warmly with the pair.

"I have been expecting you ever since I heard of this terrible affair. Perfectly awful, isn't it?"

"Never heard of anything worse since I was hatched!" the town marshal observed.

"Yes, it is a shocking tragedy," Reginald replied, and the younger brother nodded his head slowly in assent.

"Some of the plantation hands came to town the first thing this morning, and they made a bee-line for the nearest whisky-shop, of course," the mayor remarked.

"They knew that any men with such a horrible bit of news to tell would be sure of a couple of drinks, anyhow."

"Some of these darks are reg'lar suckers!" the marshal observed, with a wise shake of the head and the air of a man who knew what he was talking about.

"And the moment the story was told, the boys came hot-foot for me, of course," the mayor continued.

"I had just got up and was opening the store, when they came to me with the news."

"Some of the boys thought we ought to git up a party and ride out to the plantation," the marshal said.

"Yes, that was the proposition," said the mayor. "But the marshal and I talked it over—you know the marshal, Mr. Brandon Gazee, gentlemen, I reckon?"

The Englishmen said that they had had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of Mr. Brandon Gazee.

"Well, we talked the thing over, and we allowed that thar wasn't no use of our going out until after we had had a talk with you, 'cos we reckoned you would be apt to come in the first thing this morning, and if we started to go out,

the odds were big that we might miss you, seeing that thar are two roads."

"Yes, there would be a chance of it," Reginald remarked.

"And then, too, we wasn't exactly sure just how bad the thing was," the mayor observed.

"It don't always do to take stock in the yarns these ducks tell," the marshal explained.

"A nigger naturally is a liar, you know," the mayor said, with that supreme contempt a certain class of men in the South feel for the blacks.

"A good many of them would rather lie than tell the truth any day, particularly if they thought they could fool a white man by so doing."

"That is so, every time, and you can just bet on it!" the marshal declared.

"So Gazee and I just reckoned we would hold our horses and remain hyer until you come in, so we could get at the rights of the matter."

This conversation took place in the front part of the store, where some twenty of the citizens had assembled, anxious to hear the news, and among the number were the two friends, Doctor Williamson and the Lone Hand.

"Yes, you see the yarn these darks told was an awful tough one, and thar was a good many in the town who wasn't willing to take much stock in it," Gazee declared.

"Yes, it was a pretty tough yarn," the mayor assented.

"They said that a gang of masked men had raided the plantation, while they were all away at a barbecue, and thar wasn't any one at home excepting you two gentlemen and Colonel Dangerfield, and that the colonel had been murdered by the desperadoes; then they had set the house on fire, and almost everything on the plantation—buildings, stock, crops—had been burnt up."

"Well, Mr. Richards, I am sorry to say that is the truth," Reginald responded, sadly.

"You don't say so!" cried the mayor, evidently greatly shocked by the confirmation of the report.

"Well, I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't heard the news from a man like you, right from the spot!" the marshal declared.

And the citizens who had crowded around with open ears, shook their heads as much as to say that they, too, would have doubted the tale.

"Why, this is one of the most atrocious crimes that has ever occurred in this section of the country!" the mayor asserted.

And there was a general expression of agreement with this assertion.

"And I don't understand the thing at all," the mayor continued. "How did it happen?"

Then Reginald related the particulars of the outrage, while the bystanders listened with almost breathless eagerness.

The young Englishman related all the particulars in full, with the exception of the conversation which had occurred between himself and brother and the old negro.

This was of such importance—or was, if old Uncle Nick's declaration was true—that he did not think it wise to make public the fact that there was a clew to the doers of the deed, for fear that some confederates of the outlaws, or possibly some of the scoundrels themselves might be among the listeners.

By this action it will be perceived that the young Englishman was an extremely prudent young man.

CHAPTER XVII.

PREPARING FOR ACTION.

THE audience drew a long breath when the tale was completed, and the mayor cried:

"By the everlasting hills, gentlemen! I tell you what it is, this calls for instant action!"

"Yes, yes!" cried the bystanders.

"I bet you it does!" cried the marshal.

"Yes, sir; we must raise a force and see if we can't hunt these rascals to their holes!" Richard declared.

"I don't think that I have ever heard of anything anywhar near as bad as this hyer affair," he continued.

"And the mystery to me is, why on earth did the rascals want to burn the house—what was the reason for that move?"

"That wouldn't do anybody any good."

"If these masked men were after plunder, as of course they were, whar was the sense of setting fire to the house, unless they were personal enemies of Colonel Dangerfield—had some grudge against him and wanted to pay it off in that way?"

Then all the bystanders looked at each other thoughtfully, and shook their heads as if the question was too great a puzzle for them to solve.

"Well, an idee was, you know," the young Englishman replied, "that the scoundrels, after having killed Colonel Dangerfield, set fire to the house to cover up all evidence of their crime."

"You must remember Mr. Richards, myself and brother would have been burnt up, too, if we had not succeeded in freeing ourselves from our bonds."

"As it is, we had, as a sporting gentleman would remark, a very close call for our lives."

"Yes, yes, I know that, but, durn the thing, I don't see why the cusses should want to commit such a crime!" the mayor exclaimed.

"Thar ain't any reason for it, as far as I can see."

"You say that they only got away with about a hundred dollars, and for the sake of covering up a paltry steal like that, it don't look probable that the scoundrels would coolly go to work to burn three men."

"No, but you forget the scoundrels killed the colonel before they set fire to the house, because when we opened the door and discovered the flames, Colonel Dangerfield sat in his chair, just where the ruffians had tied him, stone dead."

"Could you see how he had been killed—any wound?" asked the marshal.

"No, but we didn't have time to make any examination, you know," the young Englishman replied.

"The moment we opened the door, the smoke and flames poured out so strongly that we were soon compelled to retreat."

"We were only able to get a look, you know; we couldn't get into the room at all."

"I see, I see," said the mayor, with a wise look and a grave shake of the head.

"Then, you know, neither my brother or myself have the slightest idea of what took place in the room between Colonel Dangerfield and the masked ruffians after we were removed from the apartment."

"Of course we were not taken away without a reason."

The bystanders all nodded assent to this.

"What the reason was only the ruffians can tell. I suppose it was to keep us from seeing them kill Colonel Dangerfield, but, as they intended to kill us too, I don't see why they should have taken the trouble to remove us from the room."

"It is the darndest, biggest mystery I think I ever struck!" the mayor declared.

"Right you are!" a sated the marshal.

"Isn't there a possibility that the outlaws did not intend to kill Colonel Dangerfield?" suggested the Lone Hand, who, in the background of the throng, had been a close observer.

"Not intend to kill the colonel?" said the mayor, taking a good look at the speaker and betraying a decided interest in him.

"Yes, I hope, Mr. Mayor, that you will pardon me from volunteering my remark, but as I am a lawyer by profession, and had some experience in cases of this kind, it is but natural that I should take a great interest in them."

"Certainly, of course, glad to hear from you, sir," the mayor remarked.

"Any assistance that we can get in a case like this hyer one is mighty welcome."

"You bet it is!" observed the marshal, who was always willing to back up his principal.

Yet, somehow, notwithstanding these protestations, both the Lone Hand and his friend, the young doctor, came to the opinion that the words did not express the true sentiments of the men, but on the contrary they did not like the interference at all, and would much rather the speaker had kept his thoughts to himself.

Petty local officials are apt to feel in this way.

Like Alexander they want no rival near their throne.

But the Lone Hand did not betray that he had any suspicion of this kind, but accepted the assurance given as though he had not the slightest doubt in regard to it.

"I made the remark, is there not a possibility that the outlaws did not intend to kill Colonel Dangerfield?" the Lone Hand said.

"If these masked men were only common marauders, in search of plunder, most certainly there was no reason why they should kill the colonel, an act which would only serve to raise the whole country for their capture, without being of the slightest benefit to them."

At this point the majority of the bystanders nodded their heads approvingly, for there was good, sound sense in the words, and they appreciated it.

"If they were personal enemies of the colonel, and came with the idea of assassinating him, then they took a very roundabout way of accomplishing their object."

"The job was performed in an extremely clumsy manner, and men as smart as these fellows seem to have been would not be likely to make such a mistake."

"Therefore, I say, does it not seem possible that the outlaws did not intend to kill the colonel in the beginning, but his death was accidental, and then, in order to cover the crime up, the deaths of these two gentlemen was resolved upon, to be followed by the destruction of the building."

This last explanation seemed reasonable, and the listeners generally agreed among themselves that the stranger had "hit the nail on the head."

"Yes, but why the deuce did the scoundrels fetch my brother and myself out of the room?" inquired Reginald, who was greatly puzzled to account for this circumstance.

"Because they had something to say to Colonel Dangerfield which they did not wish you gentlemen to hear," the Lone Hand replied.

"Yes, but what could they have had to say to

the colonel?" the mayor questioned. He had been paying the utmost attention to the words of the Lone Hand.

"Ah, it is not an easy matter to answer that question," replied the other.

"But, from the words of this gentleman," and the speaker bowed to Reginald Dunlip, "I gathered that the outlaws were not satisfied with the plunder which they had gained."

"A hundred dollars, divided among four of them, wouldn't amount to much, and would hardly pay them for their trouble."

"It is possible that they had a suspicion that a wealthy planter, like Colonel Dangerfield, would be apt to have money concealed somewhere in the house, and their object in seeking to have a private interview with him was by the means of threats to make him reveal where his money was."

"They may have even resorted to torture to accomplish their purpose, and so have caused the colonel's death, without really intending to kill him."

Again nearly every one of the listeners nodded his head, as much as to imply that this statement seemed to them to be quite possible.

"I shouldn't be surprised if you were pretty nearly right, stranger!" the mayor declared.

"But why or how the colonel was killed ain't the pint that we are after now."

"We want the men that did the job; that is our game!"

"Yes, yes, that's the game!" echoed the marshal. "This hyer is the biggest outrage that has ever been perpetrated in this community, and we ain't good citizens or honest men if we don't hunt the blamed rascals down!"

All present vigorously applauded the speech, for the sentiments went straight home to them.

"Now, fellow-citizens, we mustn't let the grass grow under our feet, but we must be up and doing!"

"We must raise a force at once and search the country thoroughly, although from the big start the rascals have, I am afraid we don't stand much chance to catch them."

"This hyer corner of the State is a mighty good place for any such gang to operate in, because Texas and the Indian Territory are so durned handy."

"A man can commit a crime in Arkansas, and, if the officers get after him, by going a few miles west, he can get over the State line into the Indian Territory, or he can go south to Texas, and the hunters can't do anything."

"So, fellow-citizens, while I don't want to discourage you, still it is as well to understand just how the thing stands."

"We will raise a force, go out to the Dangerfield place, examine the locality thoroughly and see if we can't strike the trail of the gang, and if we have any such luck, we will run them for all we are worth, although I can tell you, right now, that the odds are a hundred to one we will fetch up at the State line with our game safe in either Texas or the Indian Territory."

"Yes, you can bet all you are worth on it!" the marshal asserted.

"Such gangs are always well-mounted, for they know that their necks often depend upon their horse's speed, and as they will have from twelve to twenty hour's start, we might about as well try to chase the wind."

"But these fellows departed by means of a boat on the river, coming down the stream!" exclaimed Bob Dunlip.

"How on earth do you know that, seeing that, according to your brother's story, both of you were tied up to chairs in a room at the time the masked outlaws took their departure?" demanded the mayor, in a rather sharp way.

Every eye in the place was immediately fixed upon the two young Englishmen.

CHAPTER XVIII.

UNCLE NICK TO THE FRONT.

"THE statement that my brother made was perfectly correct," the younger Dunlip replied, not at all discomfited by the close scrutiny which had been so unexpectedly fastened upon him.

"I did not say that either I or my brother saw the scoundrels depart, for such a thing was clearly impossible, as we were securely tied to the chairs at the time the departure must have taken place, for it seemed pretty certain to me that the outlaws left the house at the time when they summoned the man who had been assigned to the task of keeping watch over us."

"Yes, yes, that seems likely," the mayor remarked.

"Well, as we did not secure our freedom for some little while after that took place, twelve or fifteen minutes at the least—possibly twenty—it is impossible, of course, for either one of us to be exact in regard to the time under the circumstances—it goes without saying that we did not see the ruffians depart, but there was a witness who did."

This declaration took all present by surprise, for it was entirely unexpected, as no evidence had yet been brought forward to show that any one was on the place besides Colonel Dangerfield and the two young men.

"Aha, there was a witness then?" the mayor

exclaimed, evidently taking the greatest possible interest in the affair.

"Yes, and not only did this witness see the outlaws depart but he feels sure he recognized some of the men despite the fact that they were so carefully disguised."

This was a startling announcement, drawing forth a general exclamation of amazement, and each man looked at his neighbor as much as to ask if it could possibly be true.

"Well, now, you can bet high that this is a mighty important thing!" the mayor exclaimed, full of excitement.

"Yes, yes, mighty important!" cried the marshal, fully as excited as the mayor.

"We want to get hold of this hyer witness right away, and if he can put us on the track of the scoundrels we'll have them in the calaboose in a brace of shakes!"

"Oh! you can bet that! We will not lose any time in putting them where they will be perfectly safe!" the marshal declared.

"Well, in regard to this witness," said the elder brother taking up the conversation at this point.

The party thinks that it is prudent to keep in the background a little and although he is ready to tell all he knows about the matter to you, Mr. Mayor, would prefer not have it openly known that he has anything to do with the matter."

"I see, I see," the mayor remarked with a self-satisfied shake of the head.

"The party has kinder got an idea that these fellows have long arms and is afraid that if he puts the officers on the track they will be apt to get at him and worry him some."

"I presume that is the idea," the Englishman admitted.

"Oh, you can gamble on that!" the marshal declared.

"Well, it takes all sorts of people to make a world," the mayor remarked in a philosophical sort of way.

"But I don't see any objection to working the matter on the quiet."

"The information is what we are after, and as long as we get it, it doesn't much matter how we get it."

"The only thing is, fellow-citizens, that it will shut you out," he remarked, addressing the throng, "but you can't have everything in this life, you know."

Then he beckoned the brothers to follow him and retreated to the back part of the store where his private room was situated.

Within the apartment conversation could be carried on without fear of listeners.

"Is this witness at hand so you can get right at the party?" the mayor asked.

"Yes."

"Because there isn't any time to waste, you know; life is short and time is flying. Can't you go out and get this witness and run him in through the back door byer before the crowd gets any idea what you are up to?" he asked.

"Yes, he's right outside," Bob Dunlip replied.

"Go for him then!"

The young man retreated through the rear door, and, as he had thought, beheld Old Uncle Nick lounging by the front corner of the building.

The black expected the call and was ready for it.

Dunlip beckoned to him, and then immediately re-entered the rear apartment, so that no one should discover that he had been in communication with the negro.

And thus it was that Old Uncle Nick managed to enter the rear room of the store without any of the crowd who were congregated in the front part of it knowing anything about it.

"The party is coming," Bob Dunlip announced, when he re-entered the room.

"Good enough!" cried the mayor, and then going to the door which led to the store, he called the marshal.

Brandon Gazee made his entrance into the room through one door just as Old Uncle Nick came in through the other.

The mayor and the marshal earnestly surveyed the old negro as he stood just within the room, bowing and scraping, with his almost shapeless old hat in his hand.

Both of them knew the negro by sight, although they were not particularly well-acquainted with him, for on account of his lameness, he had not been a frequent visitor to Blazing Star during the last few years.

"Take a seat on the bed, gentlemen," said the mayor, pointing to the camp-cot which stood in one corner of the apartment.

"I'm rather short of chairs, for I keep bachelor's hall and don't have many visitors."

The statement in regard to the chairs was correct enough, for there was only one in the room, and that wasn't a chair at all, but a stool, to make an Irish bull.

The brothers sat upon the cot, the marshal perched himself upon the table, and Richards took possession of the stool.

"Now, then, we are all ready for business," the mayor observed.

"Is this the witness, gentlemen?"

"Yes, sir," Reginald responded.
 "I think I know him, Old Uncle Ned?"
 "No, sah, not Uncle Ned, Uncle Nick, sah," replied the negro.

"Ah, yes, yes; well, it seems to me that it is some time since I have seen you in Blazing Star."

"Deed it am, sah; I'se got a powerful bad leg, sah, and de ole man can't walk as he used for to do."

"Well, that's bad, for you are still pretty spry, uncle, I take it."

"Yes, sah, no right to complain, sah, not a bit, all but dat leg."

"This is an awful affair up at your place, uncle."

"Deed it is! It is enuff fur to make dis yere ole nigger boo-hoo jist like a chile!"

"Mr. Dunlip here tells me that you know something about the scoundrels who committed the crime."

"Yes, sah, dat's so—dat's so, as sure as you're born. I see'd 'em—I see'd 'em with my own two-looking eyes!"

The mayor and the marshal were all attention.

"Well, it is a mighty lucky thing, for I reckon thar isn't any other clew to the scoundrels."

"Go ahead, uncle, and tell us all about it."

"Yes, sah; I war down by de ribber, whar I had set a line for to catch a few catfish, an' I done got sleepy, an' I jes' stretched myself out in de bushes fur to git a few wunks of sleep, an' fore long dere war a trampin' in de bushes dat woke me up."

"I t'ought dat it war mighty queer, an' I jes' kep' as still as a mouse."

"Den some men, wid black kivers over dere faces, kem along, an' dey got into a dug-out whic dey had hid away in de bushes, an' arter a bit ob talk dey went down de ribber."

"Aha! You overheard the conversation, then?" cried the mayor, rubbing his hands in a gleeful manner.

"Gosh! We'll catch 'em, sure."

"A mighty lucky thing, uncle; and you recognized some of the scoundrels, eh?" cried the marshal, who had not spoken before.

The old negro nodded his head, grinned until he exhibited every tooth in his mouth, and fumbled in a nervous sort of way with his old hat as he looked from one to the other.

There had been a great change in the expression of his face all of a sudden.

Before, he had a quiet, thoughtful look—a really shrewd and intelligent expression.

Now he looked more like an idiot than anything else.

When the cruel weight of adverse circumstances crushes the courage and self-reliance out of a man, nature, as if to make amends, allows low cunning to become strongly developed.

A man like the old negro, when cornered, could not be expected to fight; he could only hope to escape by trick and device.

"Yes, sah," and the old man chuckled.

The English brothers looked at the negro in surprise.

Coming in contact daily with the black, they supposed that they knew all about him, but they had never before seen him act as he was acting now.

They supposed it was due to the important position in which he found himself.

"Mighty lucky thing," the mayor repeated.

"Now be sure to jog your memory, Uncle Nick, so that you can give us every word the men said. Don't let a single word escape you, for it is vastly important, I tell you!"

"Gazee, better get out your memorandum-book, so as to take the thing down."

The marshal got his book and pencil ready, as he was bid.

"But I say, Mr. Mayor, hadn't we better have a description of the men first?" Gazee suggested.

"A description?" observed Richards, thoughtfully.

"Yes, so we will be able to identify the scoundrels when we get hold of them."

"Well, I reckon that would be a good idea. What do you think?" this to the brothers.

They replied that they thought it would be a good plan.

"I reckon so. We'll take the description fu'st. Now, uncle, just give us an account of what the men looked like and how they were dressed, as near as you can remember."

"Yes, sah," responded the grinning negro.

CHAPTER XIX.

A DIFFERENCE OF OPINION.

"ARE you all ready, Brandon?"

"All ready," responded the marshal.

"Well, we will fire away then!"

"First the number—how many, uncle?"

"Six, sah."

"No, no!" cried the two brothers in a breath.

"There were not six—only four!"

"Deed, gemmen, dere was six when I see'd 'em!" cried the old negro, stoutly, and still with the idiotic grin on his features.

"There were only four came into the house," Reginald Dunlip exclaimed, positively.

"Oh, yes, not the least doubt about it," the younger brother assented.

"Yes, but the scoundrels may have left two outside to keep watch, you know, to prevent them from being surprised," the mayor suggested.

Both of the brothers shook their heads decidedly; they did not believe in this supposition at all.

"Of course it is not impossible that such a thing might be, but I don't believe there were more than four of the desperadoes, all told," Reginald asserted.

"And then, too," interposed Bob Dunlip, "the fellows had very little reason to dread a surprise, for they knew pretty well that all the hands on the place had gone off to the barbecue, for they boasted that they had taken advantage of the fact to make their raid."

"Deed, dar was six ob dem got inter de dug-out," protested the old negro, stoutly.

"Must have been a pretty good-sized dug-out to hold six men," exclaimed Reginald, who had in some mysterious way got the impression that the negro knew he was lying, and therefore felt inclined to be angry with him for sticking so stoutly to his falsehood.

"Deed it was, Massa Dunlip; de biggest dug-out dat I ebber seen."

"Now, what did these men look like?" continued the mayor.

"Dey was six of de biggest men dat anybody ebber run across!" exclaimed the negro.

"Yes, sah, dar wasn't one ob dem dat wasn't bigger dan you, sah, Mister Mayor."

"Oh, no, no!" exclaimed the two Englishmen, completely losing their patience at this statement.

"Hullo! what's the matter?" cried Richards.

"Isn't that correct?"

"Not at all!" Reginald exclaimed.

"Decidedly not," asserted Robert.

"Well, what is your statement?"

"Three of the four men were large, one of them—the man who kept guard over us when we were carried into the room next to the library—particularly so," responded Reginald.

"The other two were men about your size, Mr. Mayor, although the ponchos which they wore made them appear larger."

"But the fourth man was decidedly undersized; a man who wouldn't weigh over a hundred and twenty-five pounds."

"Deed, sah, I nebber see'd no sich man," the old negro declared.

"De gang w'ot got into de dug-out war all big fellers, ebbery one of dem."

"Well, there seems to be a decided difference of opinion between you and the dark' in regard to this matter," the mayor observed.

"It is no use, your Honor, for you to listen to him if he is going to tell you any such cussed nonsensical yarns as this six big men story!" Reginald Dunlip declared, in a rage.

"Deed, Massa Dunlip, I ain't tellin' nuffin' but de bressed trufel!" the old negro protested, grinning as much as ever.

"Well, we'll take his statement now as long as he has begun."

"Six big men, Uncle Nick?" the mayor said, turning to the negro.

"Yes, sah, an' I'll sw'ar to dat, too!"

"How were they dressed?"

"Wa-al, Massa Mayor, I dunno much 'bout dat," the negro replied, scratching his head as though to quicken his ideas.

"De fact is, sah, dey had on long black t'ings like cloaks, you know, which kivered 'em all up cl'ar from dere necks to dere heels."

"No such thing!" cried Reginald, testily.

"There wasn't a man in the band who had on a cloak."

"They wore rubber blankets with a hole in the middle through which their heads were stuck—what you call a poncho, you know."

"Yes, that is what they all had on!" assented Bob Dunlip.

"No, sah, not de men w'ot I see'd!" the old negro declared, immediately.

"You blarsted old fraud, you!" cried Reginald Dunlip, in a rage. "I don't believe you saw the scoundrels at all!"

Both the mayor and the marshal laughed at this outbreak.

"It seems to me, Dunlip, that there is a wide difference of opinion between you and your witness," the mayor observed.

"By George! your Honor, the deuced black ape has made a fool of me!" Reginald Dunlip declared, with considerable heat.

"I thought from the way the fellow spoke that he really had seen the desperadoes when they got into their dug-out, but after this deuced ridiculous description of his I know very well that he did not see them at all and knows nothing whatever about the affair, and, naturally, I am annoyed at being made a fool of by him."

"Deed, sah, I'm telling you jes' w'ot I saw," protested Uncle Nick.

"You say you overheard a conversation between the men?" said the mayor.

"Yes, sah."

"Do you think you can remember what they said?"

"Oh, yes, sah, 'cos they didn't say nuffin' much, an' I had my ears open drefful wide!"

"That was a very good idea!" the mayor ob-

served. "Now go ahead and tell us all about it, and you, Gazee, pay attention and put it all down in your book."

"I can tell you one thing, your Honor!" exclaimed Reginald Dunlip, unable to refrain from expressing the disgust he felt. "And that is, if he doesn't stick any closer to the truth in his report of what the men said than in his description of them, you will not get information that will be apt to be of much value to you."

"Oh, Massa Dunlip, now you shouldn't talk ag'in' de ole man w'ot nebber did nuffin' to you!" Uncle Nick exclaimed.

"Well, we'll let him go ahead and tell his story and then we can sift it down afterward," the mayor remarked in a jovial sort of way as if he thought the matter was considerable of a joke, and from the amused look upon the face of Gazee, the marshal, it appeared as if he looked upon the affair in the same light too.

"Pitch in, Uncle Nick, and tell us what they said," commanded the mayor.

"Yes, sah," and then the old negro scratched his head for a moment as if the operation was an aid to his memory.

"De biggest man in de crowd was de one dat had de longest beard," began the negro.

"Ah, they had beards then?" interrupted the mayor.

"You didn't say anything about that before!"

"Deed, sah, I reckon I mus' have done forgot dat. Yes, sah, dey all had beards—long beards, as black as a hat, an' dar ha'r long and black too, sah."

"No, it wasn't!" exclaimed the older brother, unable to restrain himself.

"Two of the men only had black hair and beards, the giant-like fellow who kept guard over us and the man who seemed to be the chief of the band."

"The medium-sized fellow had tawny hair and beard, and the other big one red hair and beard."

"You are sure about this?" asked the mayor in a tone of question as if he thought there might be some doubt about the matter.

"Perfectly so, eh, Bob?"

"The description is correct and if the old darky says that the men he saw all had black hair and beards, then he either didn't see the fellows who committed the outrage at all, or else he was so scared that he couldn't see straight," the younger brother replied.

"I'm a-tellin' yer jes' w'ot I see'd, and dat's all I know about it!" persisted the old man.

"Well, go ahead! come to the conversation. Let us hear what the fellows said to each other," the mayor commanded.

"Yes, sah; well, sah, de biggest man in de party, he says, says he, 'Mike, did you bring de whisky wid yer?' and de odder feller, w'ot he spoke to, you know, he says, says he, 'Bad luck to me, I done forgot it, Teddy.'"

"Mike and Teddy!" exclaimed the mayor, "why the names would seem to imply that those two were Irishmen."

"That is all sheer stuff and nonsense, your Honor!" cried Reginald.

"A regular cock and bull story, you know. There wasn't any Irishmen in the party which assaulted us."

"Bob and I ran a place in Ireland for nearly five years, and it isn't likely that we wouldn't know an Irishman if we heard him speak."

"Every one of these fellows were genuine Americans and there isn't the slightest doubt about it."

"Not the slightest, and men native to this section, if I have any ear for accents," Bob Dunlip asserted.

"Well, was that all they said?" the mayor asked.

"Yes, sah, every word, 'cos I heerd it all, den dey got into de dug-out and went down de ribber," replied the old darky in the most positive manner.

"And do you think you would know any of these men if you should meet them again?" the mayor asked.

"Oh, yes, sah; yes indeedy, honey. I would be sart'in for to know either one of dem two Irishers."

The two Dunlips shook their heads like men utterly disgusted.

"Is that all, Uncle Nick?" Richards inquired.

"Yes, sah, dat is all dat I know."

"Well, you can go; keep the thing quiet, you know, and here's a dollar for your trouble."

The old negro received the gift with many thanks and departed.

"Honestly, gentlemen, I don't think the old rascal saw any of the outlaws at all!" the mayor exclaimed.

"Neither do I," said the marshal.

"Yes, I think myself that the old dark' played it on me, as you Americans say," Reginald Dunlip observed.

"And as to keeping it quiet, the nig will have it all over town in an hour."

CHAPTER XX.

A CALL FOR VOLUNTEERS.

By the time that the interview described in the last chapter terminated, about all the people who had been congregated in the store of the

mayor had got out on the sidewalk, and there was a group of talkers at the corner of the house, next to the hotel, when the old negro came hobbling from the back of the building.

Naturally it did not require any "ghost to come from the grave" to tell the citizens that the old negro had been in the back room in consultation with the party closeted there.

Nearly all in the group were acquainted with the old fellow, and knew that he belonged to the Dangerfield Plantation.

It was not strange then that they jumped immediately to the conclusion that he was the witness spoken of by the elder Dunlip, who would be able to identify the masked marauders.

One of the party instantly voiced the suspicions which nearly all of them felt:

"That's Old Uncle Nick from the Dangerfield place!" the man cried.

"He has been in the back room talking with the mayor, and it is a horse to a hen that he is the witness that Dunlip allowed had seen the gang."

"Let's fire some whisky into him and then pump him dry," another of the crowd suggested.

"Yes, that's a bully good idee!" exclaimed a third, one of the oldest inhabitants of the town.

"I reckon, fellow-citizens, that we ought to know all the rights of this hyer thing as well as the mayor and the marshal!"

All of the party agreed with this idea, and so when the old negro came up, he was immediately surrounded by the citizens.

The last speaker, an old white-headed man, Major Tom Bull by name, had known Uncle Nick for fifty years, and he immediately accosted the negro:

"Hallo, uncle, how do you find yourself?"

"Porely, sah, porely, major," Uncle Nick replied with a doleful shake of the head.

"Dis yere old nigger has had a drefful time wid de rheumatics."

"One leg, sah—dis yere left one—is powerful bad."

"Well, that's mighty tough now, I tell yer!" the major remarked, sympathizingly.

"I can understand all about it, 'cos I'm afflicted that way, myself."

"I kin ginerally tell when it's gwine to rain, twenty-four hours ahead."

"Come in and have a drink, old man."

The party were standing within a couple of yards of the door of the hotel bar-room, and therefore it did not take them long to range up before the bar.

The two friends, Doctor Williamson and the Lone Hand, were on the outskirts of the group and when the move toward the bar-room was made, the Lone Hand laid his hand upon Williamson's arm.

"Let us follow them," he said.

"They have got the negro into the saloon with the idea of getting him to tell what he knows about this fearful tragedy."

"There isn't much doubt that he is the witness the young Englishman spoke of and that he has been in consultation with the mayor and marshal in the rear of the store, so his information is undoubtedly important."

"Yes, if he can be induced to talk," the young doctor observed.

"But he looks like a shrewd fellow, and it may be possible that he will not tell his tale."

"As a rule, these negroes are always glad of any chance which will serve to enhance their own importance, but we will soon see."

Then the two friends followed the citizens into the bar-room.

Uncle Nick was in the act of disposing of an extremely large "horn" of whisky when the pair entered.

"Well, gemmens, hyer's my 'spects to you all, an' I'm much obliged fur yer kindness to de ole man," he said.

Then he opened his capacious mouth, half-shut his eyes, and the fiery liquid went down his gullet at a single swallow.

Major Tom had stood treat for the crowd, and after the drinks had been disposed of, the landlord who had been posted by one of the citizens as to why they had brought the old negro into the saloon, proposed that the crowd, including Uncle Nick, should take a drink with him.

So another "round" was set up and duly drank, and then Major Bull proceeded to action.

"That was an awful bloody business out on your plantation, uncle," the aged citizen remarked.

"Awful, sah," responded the negro with a groan.

"I don't think I rightly heard the thing; the major remarked."

"How was it, hey?"

The old negro cast a cautious glance around him, and then said, mysteriously:

"Deed sah, I dunno as I ought for to say anyting 'bout it, for Massa Mayor, he done tole me fur to keep shut pan."

"Oh, the mayor be hanged!" the major exclaimed. "I reckon that he don't own the hull town if he is the mayor!"

"We are interested in this hyer thing, we are, all of us, and we want to know jest how the hull blamed business happened."

"Now, you jest sail in yer elephants and I will see that no harm comes to you from shooting off yer 'tater-trap!"

Thus encouraged, Old Uncle Nick told his story, which was substantially the same that he had related to the mayor.

All within hearing listened attentively, and when the tale was done the major expressed the opinion of the citizens by declaring that the quicker a force was raised to hunt down the bloody-handed outlaws the better it would be for the community.

Then they all had another drink, Uncle Nick included, and adjourned to the street.

There the crowd broke up into little groups, and fell to discussing the outrage.

Soon the mayor made his appearance in front of his store.

"Fellow-citizens, will you give me your attention for a moment?" he exclaimed at the top of his powerful lungs.

Thus addressed, all within hearing made haste to gather in front of Richards's store.

"Fellow-citizens! I s'pose by this time that you are all acquainted with the particulars of the bloody murder of an esteemed friend, Colonel Jefferson Dangerfield, on his plantation last night by these hyer masked outlaws—so thar ain't any need for me to dwell upon the subject."

"We must be up and doing, feller-citizens! 'Tain't any time to loiter when one of our best men has been struck down in cold blood by ruthless, red-handed murderers."

"I want twenty volunteers to j'ine with me and Marshal Gazez in a hunt after these outlaws. Twenty men who can provide good horses and weapons, because we will have a long chase, sure, and if we run the fellows down they will be apt to fight like bulldogs."

"No old plugs will answer, and every man ought to have a rifle and a pair of revolvers, for it will be apt to be long-range work at first."

"Now, fellow-citizens, attend to this business just as quick as you can, for I want to be on the road to the Dangerfield Plantation within an hour."

"I will be in the store hyer to take down the names of the volunteers, until the time to start, which will be prompt to the minute in one hour, and I don't want any man to join the expedition if he can't provide a good horse and good weapons."

"The horse is the first thing, because if a man isn't well-mounted he will only keep the rest back; and I tell you, fellow-citizens, we can't afford to let the grass grow under our feet when we sail into a business of this kind, because the men we are after will be apt to be well-mounted, and we must be the same, or thar ain't any use of our starting in to try and make the rifle."

"I want twenty men, I say, but if I can't get twenty, ten will do, or five for that matter, but they must be up to the mark."

"That's all, fellow-citizens!"

Then some one proposed three cheers for the mayor, which were given with a will, and Richards retired into the store.

"What do you say?—shall we take a hand in the fun?" Williamson queried of the Lone Hand.

"I've got a horse all right, but how about the rifles?"

"I have a pair," the young doctor replied. "And two capital horses, in fact, half-thoroughbreds who can outlast anything in the horse line in this district."

"And the rifles?"

"Two Colt's repeaters; good weapons, safe for a man to risk his life upon."

"All right, I am with you then!"

"Let us go in and register."

The two friends were the first to give their names for the marshal's memorandum-book.

And Richards and Gazez exchanged glances when the stranger gave his name as L. Hand.

"You don't carry a very long handle around with you, Mr. Hand," the mayor remarked, in a jocose way.

"No, a traveler ought not to have much baggage, you know," the other replied, in the same bantering spirit.

"L. Hand—lone hand," the marshal remarked, reflectively.

"Is that the kind of game you play?"

"Sometimes—when I think my cards are strong enough to make the rifle, you know."

Then they all laughed, as if the stranger had said a good thing, and the friends departed to prepare for the trip.

When they entered the hotel they found a large party of citizens, who by reason of age or inability to procure good horses and weapons, were not going to volunteer, busily engaged in discussing the situation.

"I reckon the mayor is barking up the wrong tree, though," Major Tom Bull declared.

"He didn't want no hosses—'tain't west to the Injun Territory nor south to Texas that he wants to go."

"Smackover Bayou is the place where he wants to look for game, for if Wildcat Jack Smackover and Big Black Bill Cookinham didn't have a hand in this job I don't want a cent!"

The veteran voiced the general thought.

CHAPTER XXI.

DISCUSSING THE SITUATION.

"WHAT do you think of that opinion?" Williamson asked, after he and his friend had got out of the saloon into the entry, on their way to their rooms.

"I think the old man is about right, accorrding to what the negro said, but the mayor believes the ruffians will try to get out of the State notwithstanding Uncle Nick's statement that he saw them go down the river in a dug-out."

"That would seem to indicate that they were making for Smackover Bayou."

"Yes, but the mayor, I suppose, thinks that was a blind to cover their real purpose, though why they should try such a ruse when they couldn't have had the slightest suspicion that any one was observing them is not clear."

By this time the pair had entered the young doctor's apartment.

"This will be a terrible blow to your lady-love," the Lone Hand observed, as he sat down while Williamson got out the rifles, prepared cartridges, examined caps, etc.

"Yes, poor Margaret, the shock will be a dreadful one, and she is on her way here now—should be here by this time," and the young doctor heaved a deep sigh.

"It is fortunate that you are here, though, or otherwise the girl would be among strangers, entirely alone and unprotected."

"Yes, and really more so than you would imagine, considering that she was born here, but the climate never agreed with her mother, who was a New York girl, whom Colonel Dangerfield met and married while on a summer trip to Saratoga; and so, when Margaret was about six years old her mother took her on a trip to the North; then came the war, and during it the colonel's wife died, and her relatives with whom she was living took care of the child until the colonel came for it after the war. Then she was sent to boarding-school, there to remain until her education was finished, Colonel Dangerfield coming North every vacation to remain with his daughter; so this is really like a strange country to her, as she left it at so early an age."

"It may seem like a heartless thing to say, but the death of the father smooths your way to marrying the girl," the Lone Hand remarked, slowly.

"Yes, I know that; of course the thought came to me the moment I heard of the tragedy," the young doctor replied, honestly.

"A man can't help his thoughts, you know, but for all the advantage the colonel's death may be to me, I wish to Heaven the old man was alive!"

"I don't doubt it in the least; you are too good a fellow, Martin, to wish to thrive at the expense of somebody else."

"Yes, I hope so; I should thoroughly despise myself if I were otherwise."

"This terrible tragedy, of course, has changed the whole outlook," the Lone Hand remarked.

"Now there is not the slightest doubt that you will win your lady."

"Yes, that is true enough, but with all my heart I wish it were otherwise, if the old colonel could be brought back to life again."

"But I say, what do you think about this mysterious affair?"

"With the experience which you must have had in such cases since you entered the Secret Service, your opinion ought to be more valuable than that of the whole town put together."

"Yes, that is true, particularly when I have a clew as to the motive which brought the ruffians to the plantation."

"A clew?"

"Yes, and you can get on the same track if you will only take the trouble to put two and two together, which is one of the great secrets of the detective trade."

"True, but my mind is not used to working out such problems."

"What was there in the colonel's possession which would be apt to attract the attention of such outlaws as these masked robbers?"

"The hundred thousand dollars in gold!" exclaimed the young doctor, a sudden light flashing in upon him.

"Exactly, and that was what the robbers were after."

"Yes, old fellow, but I say how could they know of the existence of such a thing?"

"That question, of course, I can't answer. But I might parry it by asking how was it that I knew of the existence of the treasure?"

"Through accident, of course."

"Yes, and accident may have made the secret known to others."

"Be that as it may, I am satisfied that the gold was what the outlaws were after."

"See how the facts in the case fit the theory."

"The two young Englishmen were removed into another room so that the outlaws could interrogate Colonel Dangerfield in regard to the treasure without the presence of witnesses."

"The colonel, I think, would refuse to answer—and from the picture which you have drawn of him as a self-willed, obstinate, determined man, it is a thousand to one that he did refuse."

"For such a man is of the stuff of which they

made martyrs in the olden times, and would rather die than yield."

"There isn't the slightest doubt about that in my mind," Williamson remarked.

"Under the circumstances such a man as the colonel would be terribly obstinate."

"Then the ruffians would resort to threats, followed by actual violence, if the threats did not produce the desired effect."

"And in this way it is probable the colonel came to his death."

"What was the dull sound which sounded like an explosion which the Englishman described?"

"I have an idea that there was a safe in the room and that the noise was made by the outlaws blowing open the door of it."

"That is one reason why I want to visit the scene of the tragedy, so I can see how the facts agree with my theory."

"By the way, did you notice what a discrepancy there is between the account given by the two Dunlips and the yarn that the old nig spun in the bar-room?"

"Yes, and the negro is lying," the Lone Hand said decidedly.

"That is what I think, but why should he lie?"

"Now again you have given me a most difficult riddle," the Lone Hand replied with a shake of the head.

"Some men lie because they like to tell a big story, others through fear of consequences which may come to them if they tell the truth."

"The negro may not have seen the outlaws at all, but only pretends to have done so for the sake of making himself of importance."

"Then again, if he did see them, it is possible that he recognized some of them in spite of their disguises, for he is a sharp old chap, nobody's fool, and the Dunlips said that at the time he declared he recognized them."

"Yes, but he has backed out of that story now, and swears he said he *would* be able to recognize them if he saw them again."

"The first time he spoke the truth and the second time he didn't," the Lone Hand asserted, just as positive as though he was certain of the fact.

"Is he lying just for fun or is there a reason for it?"

"A reason, I think. I have studied these blacks pretty closely during the last ten years, and I think I understand them quite well."

"A peculiar sort of low cunning is the strongest trait in their nature."

"Now figure it out in this way."

"The old negro comes to town, prepared to tell his story—to denounce the assassins—and here, right in the town of Blazing Star, he discovers some of the very men whom he is going to denounce."

"A white man would go ahead, reasoning that the law would protect him from the vengeance of the men he accuses, but the black, by long and bitter experience has discovered that the law *doesn't* always protect him when he makes a charge against a white man."

"The negro reasons to himself, 'if I tell the truth I will be killed, if I patch up a lie and so deceive the rascals into the belief that I did not recognize them I am all right.'"

"And this is where comes in this ridiculous cock and bull story about there being six men, when the Dunlips only saw four, and that two of them were Irishmen."

"By Jove, old fellow!" Williamson exclaimed. "You are starting a pretty bold theory when you suggest that some of these outlaws are right here in Blazing Star!"

"Yes, and I will make a bolder statement still. Some of the very men who had a hand in this outrage will ride with us this day in chase of the doers of the deed!"

"Isn't there an old saying that the devil lurks in the shadow of the church? And isn't it a shrewd device of the cunning robber to shout 'stop thief!' so as to divert suspicion from himself?"

"My experience down in this wild and lawless region has assured me that there never was a band of three desperadoes yet that did not have their confederates, right in the heart of some popular village, and, if reports are true, Blazing Star numbers some pretty hard cases among her citizens."

"Yes, I guess there ain't any doubt about that, for soon after I hung out my shingle in the town, the landlord asked me confidentially, what kind of trouble I had been into, that I had been forced to *run away* from the East."

"And when I told him he was wrong in regard to that, he laughed and said he didn't blame me for keeping the thing dark, but it wasn't any use to try and fool him that I hadn't been in trouble, because he 'reckoned' there wasn't one stranger out of a hundred who settled in these parts who hadn't been forced to get out between 'two days' for fear of the law."

"Nice sort of reputation to affix to the inhabitants of his village," the Lone Hand remarked with a laugh.

"But there isn't much doubt that in the main he is correct."

"When you are ready let us get out, for I want to have a little talk with these Dunlips before we start. And, by the way, I'm open to

bet you ten to one that nary clew to the perpetrators of this outrage do we get this day."

"Oh, no, I haven't faith enough to accept even such odds."

The weapons being prepared they proceeded to the bar-room of the hotel.

CHAPTER XXII.

A CONFESSION.

In the bar-room sat the young men whom the Lone Hand desired to see.

The two friends advanced; Williamson greeted the Englishmen, and then introduced them to the Lone Hand.

"Terrible affair out at your place," the doctor observed.

"Perfectly awful, you know," Reginald responded, while Robert shook his head in a manner which indicated volumes.

"Are you going with the expedition?" the Lone Hand asked.

"Yes, as far as the plantation; but we can't keep on in the chase, for Bob, here, has no horse," and I don't feel like going without him," the elder brother replied.

"You see his horse perished in the fire; mine escaped because he happened to be in town here getting shod. I brought him in yesterday, but the blacksmith was away on a spree, and so I left him, as I was in no particular hurry."

"It was a lucky thing as it happened, for if I hadn't I should be minus a horse now."

"I have a spare horse which is at your service," the doctor remarked.

Robert Dunlip's countenance brightened, for he was not at all inclined to remain quiet while the expedition was on the move.

"How are you off for rifles?" the Lone Hand inquired.

"Oh, we are all right there," Reginald answered.

"By a lucky chance both our rifles are at the gunsmith's, being put in order."

"That is fortunate."

And then in a quiet way, without seeming to betray any undue interest in the matter, the Lone Hand turned the conversation to the subject of the tragedy. As he had expected, both of the brothers were indignant at Old Uncle Nick for "fooling" them in the manner in which he had, and the questioner soon discovered that neither of the two had the slightest suspicion as to why the negro had acted in such a strange manner.

Then, by skillfully-put questions, the seeker after knowledge brought out the fact that there was a small, old-fashioned safe in the library.

Then, referring to the dull explosion which the brothers had described, the Lone Hand suggested that it might have been produced by the blowing open of the safe, and the Dunlips immediately replied that they had never thought of that before, and it undoubtedly was the true explanation of the cause of the noise.

After this talk the party quitted the hotel and proceeded to the stable for the purpose of getting the horses, the Englishmen first getting their rifles from the gunsmith, whose shop was across the way.

Reginald's horse, after being shod, had been returned to the hotel stables, and in the same quarters were the doctor's steeds and the well-bred charger of the Lone Hand.

As the group stood on the outside of the stable, waiting for the grooms to get the horses ready, Old Uncle Nick was seen coming up the street, considerably the worse for liquor.

He had been down in the negro part of Blazing Star, retailing his news, and the vile whisky with which his labors had been repaid had been too much for him.

"There's the old black rascal now!" Reginald exclaimed, wrathfully.

"Wouldn't I like to give him a touching up with a horsewhip!"

"What's the old fellow's full name?" the Lone Hand inquired in a careless sort of way.

"Dangertield."

"Ah, I see, takes the name of his master, after the old custom in vogue before the war."

"Yes, I believe so; he's the oldest hand by far on the plantation."

The old negro came hobbling up, and when he reached the group, took off his hat and made a low bow.

"Is do party gwine fur to start soon, Massa Dunlip?" he inquired.

And as he spoke it was plainly to be seen that if the liquor had made his legs a little unsteady, it had not produced the slightest effect upon his head.

"Don't you speak to me, you old black rascal!" exclaimed Reginald Dunlip, wrathfully. "I am disgusted with you!"

"Oh, Massa Dunlip, you shouldn't talk to pore Ole Uncle Nick dat 'ere way!" the negro rejoined, wagging his head in a sorrowful manner.

"No, sir, I'll have nothing more to do with you, after the infernal lies you have told!" Reginald exclaimed.

"By Jove! you know, I thought you were a faithful servant, and I believed you would be willing to risk your life to punish the murderers of your master; but now here you turn about and tell a ridiculous yarn, which would

put everybody on a false scent, if your tale was believed, but it isn't."

"Deed, massa, dis yer pore ole nigger would be willin' fur to do almost anyting ior to help cotch de scamps dat killed Massa Colonel Dangertield"—and here the black came to an abrupt pause, and looked at the Lone Hand searchingly.

"Who's dis yere gemman?" he asked.

"Oh, I'm a stranger here," our hero answered. "My name is Hand."

"But, by the way, I think I used to know a boy of yours. Didn't you have a son, young Nick Dangertield, in the Twentieth Arkansas—the colored regiment?"

"Yes, sah, yes, sah!" and the old man, trembling with excitement, fixed his eyes earnestly on the face of the other.

"He had a narrow escape at the battle of the Sabine."

"His gun was knocked out of his hand by a spent ball, and just then one of Fagan's cavalrymen rode up and would have cleaved his head open with a saber, if a Union officer had not seen the movement, and killed the rebel with a revolver-shot."

"Yes, sah, dat's de trufe—my boy done tole me all about it!" the old man ejaculated, still quivering with excitement and never wavering in his look.

"I heard about the narrow escape of the youngster in Little Rock, and the name being an odd one, produced an impression upon me." The Lone Hand spoke in an indifferent way, and as he did so, caressed his chin with his left hand.

Upon the little finger was a rudely-made little ring, which looked as if it had been carved with a knife out of a lump of silver.

The moment the old negro caught sight of the odd-looking ring his eyes glistened, and then he grinned until his mouth seemed likely to extend from ear to ear.

He made a series of profound bows to the Lone Hand, saying:

"Deed, sah, I'se powerful glad fur to see any gemmen dat ebber knowed anything 'bout my son."

The two Englishmen did not attach any importance to this incident, for it amounted to nothing to their thinking.

But Williamson, who had been an eye-witness to the saving of the negro's life at the "Crossing of the Sabine," and knew that the little silver ring had been a gift from the grateful soldier to the officer who had saved him, perceived that, in a quiet way, his friend had made himself known to the negro and given him to understand that he could be trusted.

"These gentlemen don't exactly understand how it is that your story in regard to the outlaws differs so much from theirs," the Lone Hand remarked.

"Can't you explain a little bit so they will understand how the land lies?"

"Yes, indeedy, massa, I reckon I kin," the old negro replied, readily enough.

"I reckon I see'd 'bout the same dat you did, Massa Dunlip," he continued, addressing Reginald, while a cunning expression appeared on his dark face. "But dis yere ole nigger ain't anxious for to be killed jes' yet, no sah, no way you kin fix it."

"Why, who would kill you for speaking the truth?" the elder Dunlip demanded in astonishment.

"Only the outlaws, and they couldn't get at you here in the town," said Bob Dunlip.

"By golly, massa, dem scallywags hab mighty long arms, sometimes."

Just then the horses were brought out and the young doctor hastened toward them.

He had a purpose in this; he thought that the two Englishmen would follow him, so the Lone Hand would have a chance to exchange a few words in private with the negro.

The device succeeded, for the brothers immediately followed in Williamson's footsteps.

"Bress de Lawd!" Uncle Nick exclaimed, cautiously, to our hero. "Dem's two nice gemmens, but dey don't know any more 'bout how to take car' ob demselves down in a country like dis vere dan a ten-year-o'd boy."

"I am still in the Government service, and it is my business to hunt down all outlaws," the Lone Hand said, rapidly, to the negro, never having the slightest fear about trusting him with the important secret, for long experience had told him that there was not the slightest danger of such a man betraying his trust.

"You recognized some of the masked men last night?"

"Two ob dem."

"Wildcat Jack Srackover and Big Black Bill Cookinham?" questioned the secret agent.

"By golly! you've lit it!"

"And the other two?"

"Too much for me, massa."

"Why did you not speak the truth to-day?"

"Bekase dar war danger in de air, massa! I couldn't see it, but I felt it all de same."

"Danger?"

"Yes, sah, de moment I got into de mayor's office I felt like I war in a trap. I knowed it, an' I hied fur to git out."

"Think you that the other two men are right here in Blazing Star?"

"Dat's w'ot I tinks; I don't know it, you know, but I ain't gwine to take any risks dat dey air."

"Keep your eyes open, and report to me if you discover anything new."

"Where does Wildcat Jack hide?"

"In Smackover Bayou, dey say; but some say dat he is done gone out of dere, and is hidin' now in Lake Walnut Bayou, an' dat is quite a piece up de ribber, you know."

"But the gang went down the river the other night?"

"Dey did, massa, sure as ye'r born."

"Keep quiet, and I'll trap the varmints before I get through with them."

Then the negro hobbled off, and the Lone Hand joined the rest.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE EXPEDITION.

THE Mayor of Blazing Star was as good as his word, and in exactly one hour from the time he had made the announcement he made his appearance in front of his store, ready for a start.

The town had not succeeded in turning out twenty men, for there was a scarcity of good horses, although almost rifles enough could have been found in the town to equip a regiment.

There was the mayor and the marshal, the two Dunlips, Doctor Williamson and his friend, the Lone Hand, and six citizens, making twelve in all; and among the citizens was Major Tom Bull and the planter with whom the Lone Hand had the leetle "discussion," Catfish Smith, who, having heard the news of the tragedy, saddled his horse, grasped his rifle and came to town, anticipating that a force would be raised to hunt the outlaws down.

Catfish Smith scowled when he beheld his conqueror make his appearance, and comprehended that the stranger was going to make one of the party.

"Dog my cats! if I wouldn't have staid at home if I had knowed he was a-comin'," he confided to Major Bull, by whose side he chanced to find himself.

"Oh, come, Catfish, you musn't bear any malice, you know; he downed you in a fair fight, and that is all thar is to it."

"I was drunk at the time, or else he couldn't have done it," the other growled.

"Lookey hyer, Catfish, I reckon you have been h'isting considerable fluid to-day, or else you wouldn't be talking fight so airy in the morning," the major responded.

"Ain't had but a pint," retorted the other.

"And w'ot is a pint to a man like me whose measure is a gallon?"

At this point the mayor gave the word, and the party set out.

The mayor and the marshal were in the advance, the citizens came behind, then the Dunlip brothers, while Doctor Williamson and the Lone Hand brought up the rear.

For the first twenty minutes few words were exchanged between any of the party, for the mayor set the pace at so good a rate that the riders had all they could do to attend to their horses.

Then Richards pulled up a little, in order to breathe the steeds and the riders had a chance for a little conversation.

The party had not attempted to keep together but were strung out all along the road, fully a couple of hundred yards separating the leaders from the rear-guard.

The mayor and the marshal were so far in the advance of the rest that they were able to converse in ordinary tones without any danger that the others would be able to hear what they said.

"I say, Gazee, do you know, I have been doing a heap of thinking over this affair," the mayor remarked.

"Yes, I have been putting in some time that way, myself."

"And the more thinking I do, the more bothered I am."

"Now you hit me again where I live."

"S'pose we don't succeed in discovering any track of these masked outlaws, and somehow, I'm kinder reckoning that we won't."

"Well, we can't do much if we don't get on their track."

"That is just as sure as that we are riding hyer. Now see, when you come to figure this thing down, this masked outlaw business is a pretty tough story."

The marshal looked at the mayor as if he didn't exactly understand what he meant.

"A pretty tough story, you know," the others repeated.

"Yes, yes."

"I have heard of some cases up at the North, you know, when a man got into difficulties—got away, you understand, with money that didn't belong to him, and when he found that he couldn't make it good again and the hull thing would come out, why then he unfortunately got robbed—robbed, you know, of just about the sum he was short."

"Yes, I see, a pretty clever dodge."

"Of course, it wasn't his fault; the cusses took him unawares, mebber shot or stabbed him, and he had the wound to show too."

"I have known the game to work beautifully,

although once in a while the fellow who tries it slips up."

"Yes, but I don't understand—"

"What it has to do with this case?" interrupted the other, impatiently.

"Gazee, old fellow, you are getting a little dull! Suppose this masked robber business is all humbug—suppose there wasn't any such thing—suppose it is all a trick got up by these two Dunlips?"

"Ah, yes, yes, I see!" the other exclaimed, amazed for a moment at the idea.

"What does any one know about how they and the old colonel stood?"

"True enough!"

"And then who knows how much money Colonel Dangerfield had in the house?"

"No one, of course."

"The colonel was supposed to be a pretty rich man, a bit of a miser too, as his father was before him, and the chances are great that he may have had a large sum of money in the house."

"The two Englishmen may have found it out and not being able to resist the temptation, stole the money, killed the colonel, and set fire to the house in order to screen their crime, then got up this story of the masked men to account for the mischief."

"Well, it could have been worked in that way," the marshal observed in an extremely thoughtful manner.

"You can bet high that it could be done!" the mayor exclaimed, decidedly.

"Why, Gazee. I have known men to be hung on less evidence than there is against these two men."

"Oh, yes, that is so; I reckon a pretty strong case could be made out against them."

"Well, now, you can just bet your bottom dollar on that, and the chances are big you would win every time, too!" the mayor declared emphatically.

"Well, what do you propose to do about the matter?"

"The programme is first for us to examine all around the plantation, and see if we can get on the track of these masked men, but if we can't discover any signs that such marauders have been on the place, then, of course, we will not be able to get on their track, and there will be nothing left for us to do but to return to Blazing Star. And in my mind there isn't the least doubt that that is exactly what we will do."

"Yes, y s, I shouldn't be surprised."

"And after we get back to the town, I want you to kinder throw out a hint of this suspicion that the Dunlips may be the men who did the job, and see how the citizens will take it."

"If the idea takes hold, and the citizens think I ought to go for them, of course I will do it in a minute, if I can count on the town backing me up."

"I see; you let me alone for working the trick all right."

"You must work the thing mighty cautiously, you know, for, maybe the town won't have it, and we don't want to get ourselves in any scrape, you know."

"Of course; but there's the evidence of the old negro in regard to the existence of the masked men," suggested the marshal.

"Don't it really look as if the Englishmen had hired him to bear witness?" asked the mayor, shrewdly.

"And the old black cuss, you know, couldn't remember what they had told him to say, and so he got the story all crooked."

"I reckon you have got the thing down pretty fine."

"Well, it looks as if a strong case could be worked up against them, but we can tell better after we get through our inspection of the plantation."

In due time the party arrived at the scene of the tragedy, and all were amazed at the destruction which had been wrought—the Dunlips, of course, were prepared for the sight.

The mansion had been completely destroyed, so little else but ashes remained.

The mayor set the plantation hands, who were loitering around, at work to find the body of the colonel, but the partially-destroyed bones of the unfortunate man were all that could be found.

During the search the safe was dug up, the Lone Hand examined it carefully, then called the attention of the others to the fact that the lock had been destroyed.

The mayor and the marshal were rather inclined to the belief that the damage had been occasioned by the fire, but the sentiment of the party was against them, particularly when the Dunlips declared, in the most positive manner, that the safe was always kept locked, and, on the night in question, they were sure they saw the colonel close the door, carefully, before he sat down to play cards.

"In that case the safe would have been locked now!" the Lone Hand asserted in his quiet, but decided way.

"A fire would never have forced open the door of the safe and smashed the lock to pieces after this fashion."

"Oh, no, gentlemen, this piece of mischief was done with gunpowder; the door of the safe was blown open."

And then the Dunlips spoke of the dull explosion which had come to their ears, and for which they were unable to account.

"Oh, thar ain't a doubt of the thing!" Major Bull asserted.

"It was the cusses blowing open the safe!"

Finding that the current of opinion was against them, neither the mayor or marshal attempted to contest the point.

And the mayor turned the conversation by inquiring of the Dunlips if they were aware whether Colonel Dangerfield kept any money in the safe or not.

"Small sums only, but last night the colonel made the remark, when he closed the safe, that it didn't make much difference whether he closed it or not, for there was nothing but legal documents in it."

Then an inspection was made of the river's bank, and, in one place, unmistakable signs were found which proved that a dug-out had been drawn up on the shore, but this proved nothing, for there were a couple of dug-outs belonging to the plantation on the bank now.

Long and earnest was the search, but no results were reached.

No clew to the marauders was found, and after scouting around the country until afternoon the riders took the homeward track, "clean beat," as Major Bull expressed it.

And yet the Lone Hand believed he had obtained a clew, although he said nothing of it to the rest.

CHAPTER XXIV.

ANOTHER RAID.

AGAIN go we to the outlaws' retreat on the island in Smackover Bayou.

Darkness had veiled the earth for about an hour—it was early evening—and both Wildcat Jack and Big Black Bill were on the alert as though they expected visitors.

"Is it time for them to come yet?" Big Black Bill queried after his partner had made a trip to lookout point and returned with the information that they were not in sight.

"Yes, I reckon it is; they allowed they would come as soon after dark as they could."

"I wonder what was the meaning of that big fire up in the direction of the Dangerfield place last night?" Big Black Bill observed.

"It looked as if the hull durned place was on fire."

"Oh, I reckon it was further off," Wildcat Jack observed indifferently.

"Mebbe it was up to the Cross Roads where the nigs war havin' a barbecue. It would be jest like the black apes to set the woods on fire with their foolishness."

"But it didn't look to be so far off as the Cross Roads."

"Ah, it is mighty hard work to tell jest how far off or how near a big fire is by night."

Then Wildcat Jack listened attentively for a moment.

"I thought so!" he exclaimed, "I thought I heard 'em!"

Catching up a fat-wood stick he lit it at the log fire blazing on the hearth and with this novel torch—common enough in the South though—hurried out to receive his visitors.

It was the same two who had paid the outlaw a visit on the evening when we first introduced the outcasts of the layou to the reader's notice.

Wildcat Jack escorted them to the hut and Big Black Bill, in the most hospitable manner, brought out the whisky jug, and the new-comers took a good draught of the potent liquor.

"That's the stuff!" cried the captain. "That puts life in a man!"

"Yes, and the damp fogs rising from these infernal bayous is enough to give a fellow the shakes," observed red beard with a shiver.

"That is so, and we have got a long ride before us, too, and the road to Richmond is none of the best."

"Got the horses all right?" queried Wildcat Jack.

"Yes, on the edge of the swamp, concealed in the timber."

"I reckon thar's considerable talk in Blazing Star in regard to last night's work, ho, ho!" observed Wildcat Jack, with a hoarse laugh.

"I reckon thar is!" replied the outlaw captain, decidedly.

"You kin bet your life on it!" declared red beard.

"By the way, what do you suppose that fire was that we saw last night?" the captain asked, abruptly.

"I allowed that it was at the Cross Roads," said Big Black Bill.

"I didn't think it was far off as that!" Wildcat Jack declared.

"And you were right, Jack, it was on the Dangerfield Plantation."

"The blazes you say!" cried Wildcat Jack.

"It was a big fire, an' I reckon it must have done a heap of damage," the other outlaw remarked.

"You are right thar, for it ruined the hull plantation. The house, the barns, stables, negro quarters, even the crops in the field, are all gone as clean as a whistle!"

Exclamations of amazement came from both the swamp outlaws.

"How did it git on fire do you s'pose?" Wildcat Jack asked.

"By accident, of course, for thar wasn't any one round the building to fire it, as we left the two Englishmen safely tied up."

"I think I can account for it, though," the outlaw chief continued.

"If you remember, boys, when I blew open the safe door with the gunpowder I made a fuse out of a bit of string."

The rest nodded.

"When the explosion took place the remains of the fuse were blown into a corner, and there they smoldered until they kindled a fire, and so the thing got under way."

"And were the Englishmen burnt up?" Big Black Bill inquired.

"No; they managed to get a pocket-knife out and cut themselves loose, and just in time, too, for ten minutes more would have settled them."

"And in course they lay the hull business to us?" Wildcat Jack observed, after thinking over the matter for a moment.

"You are right thar—they do."

"Wa-al, it don't make much difference as far as I kin see," Wildcat Jack remarked.

"A man might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb, anyway."

"In course, we kin afford to laugh at 'em, for we didn't leave the least bit of a clew behind us."

"Well, I'm not so sure about that," the outlaw chief remarked.

"Eh! what's that?" Wildcat Jack cried, startled.

"You don't mean for to go for to say that any cuss has got after us?" Big Black Bill questioned.

"Well, I don't know; that is a point on which I am a leetle doubtful."

"Of course, the two Englishmen gave a full description of the way we were got up, and how we played our game; but that don't amount to much, for their story won't give any clew to us; but a cursed, old, lame nigger, Old Uncle Nick, said he was asleep in the bushes when we passed by to get into our dug-out—we woke him and he recognized some of us."

"Wa-al, that's blazes to pay, and no mistake!" Wildcat Jack declared.

"Yes; I reckon some chaps about our size will have to be lighting out of hyer pretty soon, or else the swamp will grow too hot to hold us," Big Black Bill observed.

"Well, I don't know about that," the outlaw leader remarked.

"The old n'ig don't tell a very straight story, and his tale don't agree with the story that the two Dunlips tell at all."

"Why, how's that?" Wildcat Jack inquired.

"Well, I don't know; there's a mystery about the affair."

"The Dunlips say there were four men, and the old negro declares there were six; and then their stories don't agree in regard to how the men were dressed, and what kind of hair and beards they had, and also in regard to the size of the men—the old nigger being wrong, mind you, every time, much to the disgust of the Dunlip boys, who couldn't understand how the darky could make so many mistakes."

"Then the n'ig said we had a talk just as we were getting into the dug-out."

"So we did!" Wildcat Jack exclaimed. "That is, Big Black Bill and I had a cussing match."

"Don't you remember?"

"Yes, it seems to me I do," the chief responded, thoughtfully.

"He was a-gwine to jump into the dug-out when I told him that he was as clumsy as a hog, and cussed him right good, and he cussed me back."

"The nigger didn't say anything about that. He told a ridiculous story about one man calling the other Mike, and asking if he had any whisky, and the other named him as Teddy, and said that he hadn't."

"Oh, thar wasn't anything of the kind said, of course," Wildcat Jack observed, evidently puzzled by the recital.

"No, of course not, and that would go to show that the nigger didn't see us at all; but how the blazes he came to make so correct a guess in regard to our departing in the dug-out, is a mystery."

Wildcat Jack was quiet for a few moments, his brows wrinkled in thought, and then he suddenly exclaimed:

"Why, dog-gone it! don't you see?"

"See?—see what?" the outlaw chief demanded.

"Why, the game the old darky is playing! Ain't it as plain as the nose on a man's face?"

"No, I can't say that I think it is, for I will be hanged if I can see what he is up to!"

"That old nigger has know'd Big Black Bill and me ever since we were knee-high to a wood-chuck, and I reckon that if he heard either one of us speak he could tell us anywhar, no matter how we were fixed."

"He *did* see us last night, and what is more, he recognized us, too; and it is big odds that he came into Blazing Star this morning with the idee of blowing on us."

"But arter he got inter the town he got to thinkin' over the matter, and the idee came to

him that if he did blow on us, and we heard on it, as of course we would, either Big Black Bill or I would be sure to lay in wait for him with a double-barrel shot-gun some day, and then thar would be one nigger less along the Red River."

"By thunder, Wildcat, I believe you are right," exclaimed the outlaw chief.

"That's the hull thing in a nutshell, and that is the reason why the old darky lied so about the thing."

"But I say, ain't thar reason to believe that he will come out and blow on us in secret to some one?"

"I reckon not; the n'ig is too skeery to take the risk."

"A man came to the town, yesterday, that I don't like the looks of at all," the ruffian chief remarked, abruptly.

"He calls himself L. Hand, and says he's a lawyer, but he looks durned sight more like a soldier; and I have an idea that he might be a spy in the detective line, come down hyer to see what he can smell out."

"He's a fighter, too," red-beard remarked, "for Catfish Smith tried to climb him and got overlastingly whaled."

"If he threatens to be dangerous, Bill and I will put him whar the dogs won't bite him," Wildcat Jack remarked, grimly.

"I'll keep my eye on him, and the n'ig, too, and at the first sign of danger from either one of them, they must be attended to," the chief observed.

"But come, time is flying, and we ought to be on the road."

"All right—git!"

The four outlaws crossed the bayou by means of the dug-out, to where four horses were tethered in the timber.

They mounted and set off, taking the road which led to Richmond, the county seat.

CHAPTER XXV.

AN ARKANSAS JUDGE.

JUDGE GAYAWAY LABODOT was one of the most eminent lawyers in Southwestern Arkansas.

In fact, his admirers insisted that he did not have a superior in the legal line in the whole entire State.

One thing was certain, the judge had gone to Little Rock and won cases there with the greatest lawyers in the state on the opposite side.

Personally the judge was a short fat man, with a round bullet-head, covered with a heavy mass of crispy curls, which had once been jet-black, but which were now thickly sprinkled with gray.

His mustache and imperial though, which he wore long, after the French fashion, were almost white as snow.

And the lawyer, who had a peculiar dry humor of his own, ascribed this to the fact that he used his mouth and jaw much more than he did his head.

The legal gentlemen, who were unfortunate enough to be opposed to him in court did not agree with the judge in regard to this matter though, for he generally used his head to such advantage that few of them were able to boast that they got the best of the judge in a legal contest.

The old lawyer however made light of his almost uniform success.

"Bah, bah!" he was wont to exclaim—the judge was of French descent as his name indicated and had a quick nervous way with him at times, as was natural to a man with a large amount of impetuous Gallic blood in his veins—"it is not luck—it is not ability—it is only my wisdom in accommodating myself to circumstances."

"Some things in this world must be so; water always runs down hill—if we put our hand in the fire we will be burnt."

"It is natural that it should be this way."

"So it is with law cases; some cases are so just—the course so clear that neither judge nor jury can help seeing which is in the right and which in the wrong."

"That is the kind of cases I take, and it is not wonderful that I win them; a child, almost, could do it."

"It is but to state the case clearly and the cause is won."

"When a client comes to me I sit in judgment while he tells his tale."

"I divest myself entirely of the thought—this fellow will pay me so much money, anyway whether I win or lose, the rock on which most men strike."

"The thought that the man is a client, with money in his pocket, is inclined to bias a lawyer's judgment, apt to warp his mind to the belief that the man has a clear case, when in reality he has no case at all."

"The lawyer says there isn't any doubt that the case is a good one, advises the client to fight, takes his retaining fee, goes into court, and, as a natural consequence, gets whipped out of his boots."

"No, sir, I never take a case without I feel a moral certainty that the man has the right on his side."

"Of course, I lose sometimes, for judges and jurors are only men and liable to err, and of all uncertain things in this world the calculation as to what the verdict of an ordinary jury will be is the most uncertain."

His envious brothers in the law declared that these frank utterances were all humbug, "sprats to catch whales," but there was no denying the fact that the judge had been known to reject case after case, saying to the would-be client:

"It will be of no use for me to go into court for you. You haven't got a leg to stand on. Go home and patch the matter up as best you may."

And as a rule, if the man didn't take the advice, but was obstinate and sought another lawyer, he generally got the worst of it when the trial came.

These qualities made Judge Labodot famous for a good two hundred square miles, and he was the trusted family lawyer of the best men in the county.

The judge was an old bachelor, took his meals at the hotel, and slept in a little room partitioned off from his office, which was in a one-storied frame building, situated on the main street of the county town.

It was the first building that one came to when approaching Richmond by the southern road.

When the judge was not in his office he could generally be found in the billiard-room of the hotel—outside of business hours is meant, of course.

The judge was a great lover of the game—in fact was considerable of a sporting man, anyway, and was looked up to as an authority in such matters.

On this particular evening, when we introduce Judge Labodot to our readers, the lawyer was at the hotel as usual, but he was not engaged in playing billiards on this occasion, for the news of the fearful tragedy on the Dangerfield Plantation had given the inhabitants of the town an ample subject for conversation.

The intelligence of the murder of Colonel Dangerfield had been brought by the two overseers, who, as the reader will remember, had hurried to Richmond, in order to put an attachment on the estate for the purpose of securing the moneys due them for wages.

"A couple of low-bred scoundrels!" the old lawyer had declared in contempt when he heard of the proceeding.

"What are they afraid of—their paltry money? Bah! The colonel has left cash enough to pay the amount a thousand times over!"

"And as for their attachment! Fiddle-dee! it isn't worth the paper it is written on!"

"Wait until I get a whack at it and see if I don't tear it all to pieces!"

Jim Craddock, although he is the youngest limb of the law in town, has legal knowledge enough to know it, too; but Jim is like too many lawyers nowadays.

"He wants clients, for he needs money, and he lives up to the doctrine that if a man wants law he ought to have it, if he can raise the funds to pay for the luxury, whether he stands any show in the fight or not."

Bold words were these, and in the hot-tempered South, many a man has been called to a hostile meeting for less.

But as the old lawyer was a dead shot with all sorts of weapons, and known to be "game to the back-bone," having come off the victor from a dozen meetings upon the field of honor—it was a saying that the judge would rather fight than eat—few men felt disposed to call him to a reckoning on account of his frank utterances.

The tragic death of Colonel Dangerfield was the universal subject of discussion, and many were the speculations indulged in by the men of the county seat in regard to the affair.

Why the colonel should be attacked in such a desperate manner, and just what the outlaws expected to gain by it was a puzzle.

The judge was appealed to for his opinion, but he replied that he was as much in the dark as any of the others.

"But you were Colonel Dangerfield's lawyer, and you ought to be posted in regard to his affairs."

"About his legal business, I am, but lawyers are not in the habit of betraying the confidence of their clients, particularly in public bar-rooms," the old judge answered, tartly.

"But this I will say, gentlemen, to relieve your bursting curiosity."

"There wasn't anything in his legal matters to warrant any such attack, for the colonel was not an unreasonable man, although high-tempered, and he has not had any trouble with any one to amount to anything, since he came back from the war."

The general impression at the county seat was that the colonel had been killed on account of some quarrel in which he had become engaged, and the supposed outlaws were, in reality, disguised foes, who had got themselves up in such a fashion to divert suspicion.

The party at the hotel did not break up until after eleven, and then the judge proceeded directly to his office.

The old lawyer was renowned for the strength of his head, and it was commonly said that he

could drink more liquor and show it less than any man in Richmond.

On the present occasion, owing to his having remained at the hotel an hour later than usual, the judge felt that he had drank a little more than was good for him, although no one would have guessed it from any outward appearance.

"An hour's sleep will make me all right, though," he murmured, as he unlocked the door of his office, entered, and then locked the door after him.

The building was a queer little one, only about twelve feet wide by twenty long.

Within, it was divided into two apartments; the outer one, the office, which was about twelve by twelve, plainly furnished, and here the judge's clerk had his desk.

The inner room was the old lawyer's sanctum, where he received visitors whose business was important, and with whom it was necessary to hold confidential interviews.

This room also served as the old judge's bed-chamber, for one of the apparent desks was really a folding-bed.

There were two doors to the building. One in the front, which gave access to the office, and a small one in the rear, which led from the bedroom.

Two windows gave light to the front apartment, and one to the rear room.

The windows were protected by stout, solid shutters, with little crescents cut in the upper part to afford light.

After entering, the lawyer lit his candle, and proceeded to brew himself a glass of punch, his usual night-cap, and without which he never went to bed.

And as he sipped his punch he meditated.

"I told the colonel it wasn't safe," he muttered. "I told him that the very birds in the air seemed to whisper such things, sometimes, but he was obstinate and thought otherwise, and now he's gone, and I shouldn't be surprised if the destruction of the house has knocked everything into a cocked hat."

"Time will soon tell though."

He finished his punch, and without taking the trouble to undress, except to remove his boots and loosen his shirt at the collar, extended himself on the bed.

CHAPTER XXVI.

VISITORS WHO WERE NOT EXPECTED.

JUDGE LABODOT possessed the rare faculty of falling asleep almost instantly, particularly if he had a little more liquor on board than usual, and on this occasion he was fast in the arms of Morpheus within five minutes after he touched the couch.

The judge enjoyed a sound and refreshing slumber for about two hours, and then he was suddenly awakened by the consciousness that there was somebody in the room.

The lawyer was a light sleeper when his brain was not befogged by the fumes of liquor.

The two hours' sleep though had sufficed to drive these away and, disturbed by a slight noise, his sleep vanished, and he sat upright in the bed.

He had extinguished the candle upon going to bed, but now it was burning again, and there were three men in the room, three long-haired, heavily-bearded fellows, all wearing black half-masks, and each and every man grasped a cocked revolver, leveled straight at the judge.

"Don't attempt to give any alarm, or we shall be obliged to silence you in an extremely unpleasant way," remarked the masked man who stood nearest to the judge's bedside, and who, on account of his speaking, the lawyer took to be the leader of the band.

The judge made a grimace as he surveyed the intruders and comprehended how completely he was in their power.

The lawyer was as brave a man as ever stepped foot to earth, but he was not foolhardy and had a most decided objection to engaging in any encounter where he stood no chance at all for his life.

He had been surprised by a desperate gang, and although he had a revolver in his pistol-pocket, yet he was well aware that any attempt to draw it would cost him his life.

He had recognized his visitors, too.

According to the description, these were the same men who had invaded the Dangerfield Plantation and slain the owner, although there were but three of them at present.

But the active mind of the old lawyer quickly conjectured what had become of the fourth man.

It was a good distance from Red River to the county seat; the outlaws had come on horseback, and the fourth man was outside in charge of the steeds.

But what on earth did they want with him?

These thoughts passed rapidly through the mind of the old judge, as the outlaw's words fell upon his ears, and he looked full in the muzzle of the desperado's pistol.

"All right, sir, I comprehend and you need not be under any fear in regard to my giving an alarm."

"I am consulted by all sorts of clients, at all sorts of times, and in all sorts of ways, and I am

too good a lawyer to do anything to offend them in any way."

The coolness of the judge's reply caused the outlaws to "snicker."

"Upon my word, judge, you are taking it mighty easily," the outlaw chief remarked.

"Oh, yes, the first thing a lawyer learns is to take things easy, from a judge's reproof to a fat fee."

"You hav'n't got any call to worry though, for you are not in the least danger as long as you pay attention to what we say to you and don't attempt to kick over the traces."

"Oh, I'm a regular lamb when I'm in a corner and find out that there isn't a show for me," the lawyer replied.

"Wa-al, you don't stand any show this heat, and no mistake, for if you showed any sign of being ugly we would plug you so quick that you would never know what hurt you," the intruder remarked, threateningly.

"Now, my unknown friend, you might as well save your breath. I understand all this hyer racket just as well as you do."

"Although, I confess, I am somewhat puzzled to know what you expect to get in this neck of the woods."

And the old lawyer looked upon the scanty furnishing of his apartment with a grim smile.

"I reckon we know what we have come arter!" the outlaw retorted.

"I reckon you do, or else you are not as smart as I take you to be, but I'll be hanged if it ain't a mystery to me," the judge observed.

"I have been accused of a good many things in my time, some justly and some unjustly, but my bitterest enemy, or most malignant foe, never had the cheek to declare that they believed I had any money."

"For I hold my coin as lightly as the purse in which I carry it," as the poet says.

"So, if you come here expecting to make a raise you will be most infernally disappointed!"

"Oh, no, I reckon we won't—I reckon we will git what we come arter, that is, if you don't git ugly, and if you do, we will plug you for keeps!"

"Don't I tell you that I am a lamb when I am cornered, and if I ain't in a tight box now, I reckon no man ever was."

The outlaw leader cast his eyes around him.

Against the wall on the opposite side to where the bed was placed, was a case of small shelves over which a pair of green curtains hung.

"I reckon the thing we want is over yonder," remarked the intruder.

"C, pull aside the curtains and lemme see what is thar."

The outlaw thus addressed obeyed the command. Upon the shelves were a couple of dozen of tin boxes, about half the size of the usual cake-box, and pasted upon the front of each box was a small label.

Judge Labodot now began to have a suspicion in regard to the object which induced the outlaws to visit him, a suspicion which was confirmed by the next words of the marauder chief.

"I want the tin box which contains Colonel Dangerfield's papers."

"Certainly; it is the second box from the right on the second shelf, counting from the top."

"The letters, J. D. are on the label on the box."

Thus instructed, Wildest Jack, who was the C. of the outlaw band, as the reader will remember, had no difficulty in getting the box, which he placed in the hands of the outlaw chief.

"It is locked," said the desperado.

The judge drew a bunch of keys from his pocket, selected one and called the attention of the outlaw chief to it.

"This key will unlock it."

The box unlocked, the intruder eagerly examined the legal documents contained in it.

There were only a few, and none of them of any particular importance.

"What I want ain't hyer!" the marauder cried, impatiently.

"Well, I didn't think it would be, although I hav'n't the slightest idea of what you are after, but I didn't believe that any of those old papers would be of any use."

"I want Colonel Dangerfield's will! You have it! Don't attempt to deny it or it will be the worse for you!" the outlaw chief cried.

"Now, don't get excited, my dear sir," the judge remarked.

"Under the pressure which you have brought to bear upon me, I am going to own up to the truth, every time, and you are safe in betting all the money you can raise on it too!"

"Colonel Dangerfield's will is in my possession, it is in the safe in the front room, and, if you will permit me, I will get it for you."

"Don't you try any gum-games you know!" the desperado warned as the lawyer swung his feet to the floor.

"Oh, well, now, come; what do you take me for?" exclaimed the old judge in a disgusted sort-of-way.

"Do you suppose I am going to risk my life by making a fight with you for a beastly lot of old papers that are not of any particular importance to any one, except their owners."

"No, no, I am not quite so great an idiot as that."

This seemed reasonable enough, so the judge was conducted into the front room, one of the

outlaws bearing a candle, and the others keeping a close watch upon the lawyer.

The judge opened the safe, took a paper out of an envelope and handed it to the marauder chief.

"Sit down!" commanded the outlaw, and he waved the judge into a chair which was by the table upon which the candle had been placed, while he examined the document.

A shorter will could hardly be drawn; it read as follows.

"I give everything of which I die possessed to my only child—my daughter, Margaret Dangerfield."

Then followed the bold signature of the colonel, and after it the names of the witnesses.

First the outlaw perused the document in silence, then, giving utterance to an exclamation of disgust, he read it aloud.

The outlaws looked at each other, while the old lawyer chuckled in his sleeve, for having an idea of the game his visitors were up to, he understood that they had been beaten so far in every move.

"Curse the old scoundrel; didn't he leave any clew?" cried the outlaw leader, throwing the will in disgust upon the floor.

"A clew?" cried the lawyer with well-affected amazement.

"A clew to what?"

"To his gold!" cried the robber. "That is what we're after and we are going to have it too!"

"It may be that in the safe is some paper that will post us," suggested the red-bearded outlaw.

"You are welcome to search, boys, but you will not find any paper connected with Colonel Dangerfield in that safe!" the judge declared.

The outlaws paid no attention to the declaration, but examined the contents of the safe in the strictest manner.

But it was as the old judge had declared.

Not a single paper referring in any way to Colonel Dangerfield could be discovered.

The outlaws were baffled.

And then the chief tried another move.

"He advanced to the lawyer and put the muzzle of his revolver right against the judge's temple."

"I'll give you five minutes to reveal to me where the old rascal concealed his gold, and if you won't I'll kill you on the spot!" he cried.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE STORY OF THE PLANTATION.

As we have stated, Judge Labodot bore the reputation of being as game a man as there was in the state of Arkansas, and the manner in which he carried himself in this trial fully proved that the tongue of rumor had not unduly heralded his fame.

He never quailed in the least, not betraying the slightest sign of the white feather.

His resolute jaw became a little firmer set, the lines around his mouth deepened, and, looking the outlaw full in the eye, he said:

"You needn't wait five minutes—go ahead now, for I hav'n't the slightest idea of what you are talking about, and if you gave me an hour I shouldn't be able to tell you any better at the end of that time than at this present moment."

"I never saw any gold—to amount to anything—in Colonel Dangerfield's possession, and I don't see where he could have got any great sum."

"From what I know of his affairs—and as the man is dead, it will not do any harm to speak now—I can tell you that his wealth has always been greatly overestimated."

"I have heard folks say that he must be worth half a million, but I can tell you from what I know of the man that he was worth his plantation and what was on it, whatever that might be, and that was all."

The outlaws were staggered, for the old lawyer seemed to speak with the accents of truth.

Was it possible, then, that he really knew nothing of the gold?

Such was the question they put to themselves.

It was not improbable that the colonel should keep the secret to himself; most men would be apt to do so for fear their confidence would be betrayed.

"Oh, come! I believe you are fooling us; you must know something of this gold!" the outlaw chief exclaimed.

"What gold is it you are talking about?"

"Why, the gold that was intrusted to the colonel's care in an army chest just at the close of the war," the outlaw replied.

"The gold which belonged to the Confederate treasury, and was brought west by Jefferson Davis when he attempted to escape across the Mississippi to Kirby Smith's department."

"Jeff Davis was captured by the Yanks, but Colonel Dangerfield, with a small party, succeeded in getting across the river, and, anticipating that the rebellion was played out, he secretly buried the chest, and after all had quieted down, went and dug it up again, and so secured the treasure."

The judge had listened with the utmost attention to the recital, but when it was finished he shook his head and laughed outright.

"Oh, no, that is a pretty good story, but it

won't wash. No, sir—e! the yarn is too tough, and I wonder at your being fooled by it."

"But it isn't any yarn; it's the truth!" the outlaw declared, angrily.

"The infernal old scoundrel got a hundred thousand dollars in gold, good, hard money, and that is what we are arter!"

"Well, I don't know anything about it. I will take my oath on a stack of Bibles as high as a church steeple that Dangerfield never told me that he had scooped in any hundred thousand dollars in gold," the old lawyer declared, stoutly.

"If he had you can bet all the wealth you can scare up that his law business would have cost him a deuced sight more than it did, for I should have gone in to get my whack out of the leetle hundred thousand."

"But the tale is all bosh!"

"Where did he get the money to fix up his plantation and to increase it in size from a few hundred acres to two thousand?" demanded the outlaw, sharply.

"From an Englishman—a sucker, to use the vernacular—whom he picked up in New Orleans."

"A young fellow with twenty thousand dollars which he had made in cotton speculations during the war."

"He went in with Dangerfield to raise cotton on a great scale, the colonel to run the plantation, and he to stay in Orleans and attend to the selling and buying, but, as he was engaged in other business, with other partners, this arrangement had to be kept secret."

"Well, the thing didn't pay, and the Englishman got in too deep in other things, and, to raise ready money, sold out to the colonel for a song, and that is how Dangerfield got his head above water."

"It is a lie!" exclaimed the outlaw chief, promptly.

"This Englishman business was a trick to account for the possession of the money, when everybody knew that it was not possible for him to have any, completely ruined as he was by the war."

"I know he got the gold, and we are going to have it, if it is on top of the earth!"

"That is just the spot where it ain't likely to be," observed the judge, dryly.

"If the colonel *did* get the gold, the chances are big that he buried it somewhere, though if he was sensible he wouldn't keep any valuables of that kind lying idle, but would have invested the cash in something where it would have brought him in good money."

"Still, men do queer things sometimes."

"Say! I can't git over the idee that you must know something of this gold!" the marauder chief exclaimed, abruptly.

"And I am ready to make you a mighty fair offer; put us on the track so we can get the gold and we will give you half of it."

"Of course now, stranger, that ain't any way to talk!" exclaimed the old judge, with a laugh.

"Why not say that you will give me the whole of the hundred thousand and have done with it?"

"And I say, it seems to me that you are not calculating as closely as you might, or else you wouldn't be wasting your breath by making offers to me," the lawyer continued.

"Don't it stand to reason that if I knew where the gold was, I would get it myself without being obliged to share it with any one?"

"Colonel Dangerfield is dead, and, if I possessed his secret, what would prevent me from getting hold of the money?"

"I make a heap out of the law, boys, but I reckon that if I had a chance to grab a hundred thousand dollars, that you wouldn't catch me fooling around any court-houses."

There was sound sense in what the old judge said, and even the dullest witted of the marauders could not help seeing it.

"Wa-al, judge, I reckon you are talkin' square," the outlaw chief remarked.

"We have gone to a heap of trouble and, so far, we hain't made much to show for it, and it is only natural we should feel disappointed."

"I hope, gentlemen, that you will do me the justice to allow that it isn't my fault," the lawyer remarked.

"I have done every thing just as you have requested; couldn't very well refuse gentlemen of such persuasive ways."

"I reckon you have a revolver, judge," the outlaw chief observed, abruptly.

"Yes, I reckon I have," and the judge drew it from his pocket.

"Do you want it?"

The outlaw extended his hand, but the lawyer hesitated to give up the weapon.

"I say, boys, this is an old partner of mine, this revolver; it has saved my skin when I have been in some pretty tight places, and if it is all the same to you I'd like to hold on to it for a while longer."

"It is only worth about ten dollars, and although I hav'n't any cash with me just now, I will give you my note for that amount."

"Oh, that's all right, we ain't a-going to take the pistol. I'm only going to take the caps off so you won't feel any temptation to take a crack at us as we git."

"We wouldn't rob you, you know, you're a lawyer—that would be unprofessional—dog won't eat dog you know."

And the outlaws all grinned at the pleasantry of their chief.

The old lawyer chuckled too at the joke.

"Oh, that's all right, boys, I will not trouble you on your retreat."

"You have let me down easy, and I bear no ill-will; besides there's an old Spanish saying which I usually try to live up to, 'Build a bridge of silver for a flying enemy.'"

But for all that assurance the outlaw took care to remove the caps from the revolver.

"That's your we'pon," remarked the fellow, as he returned the pistol.

"And if I was you I wouldn't say much about this hyer leetle call of ours; it won't do you no good, you know, and mebbe, it might do us some harm."

"Oh, don't be alarmed about that; we lawyers generally know enough to mind our own business."

"And I say, if you should happen to stumble upon any trace of this gold when you come to settle up the colonel's affairs and think we kin help you to get it, jest drop a line to C. D. Gold, Blazing Star, and I will be sure to get it, for I will have a friend keep a lookout on the post-office."

"All right, I will remember."

And then the outlaws retreated as quietly as they had come.

The judge listened at the crack of the door.

They were provided with horses, as he had anticipated, for he heard the sounds of the animals' hoofs as they rode away.

How they had gained access to the room was a puzzle to the judge at first.

But when he found the key, which had been in the lock on the inside of the door, lying upon the ground, he understood.

They had pushed the key out from the outside, and then opened the door by means of a skeleton key.

As the lock was only a common one this had been an easy task to accomplish.

"It is as I thought," the old lawyer murmured, conversing with himself, as he mixed another tumbler of punch preparatory to seeking his couch again.

"The birds did carry the news—the desperadoes were after the gold, and the supposition that he possessed the treasure cost Colonel Dangerfield his life."

"And I warned him, too, but he laughed and replied that he knew what he was about."

"Ah! how blind we mortals are!"

Twenty minutes later and the old lawyer was fast asleep again.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE DAUGHTER.

MARGARET DANGERFIELD had concluded her European tour in Paris, and then sailed directly from the gay French capital to New Orleans, and from that city started for home by means of a steamer bound up the Red River.

At Shreveport she changed from the New Orleans packet to a small "stern-wheeler," which, during the high-water season, ran on the Upper Red River.

"The Belle of Fulton," the boat was called, named after that lively little Arkansas town, and the captain vowed that she was as good a craft as had ever cut the Upper Red River with a keel, but she was a terribly slow boat for all that, and, as the captain was an easy-going sort of fellow who never seemed to be in a hurry, The Belle of Fulton was nearly a week longer in getting to Blazing Star than she ought to have been.

At the time of which we write the steel rails of the iron horse had not intersected the South-western region as at present.

The steamboat and the stage-coach afforded the only means of communication.

Doctor Williamson knew that Miss Dangerfield was coming up the river on the Belle of Fulton, and had been on the lookout for her boat.

The arrival of the boat was always a great event in the town of Blazing Star, and as soon as it was announced that the steamer was in sight, all the inhabitants of the place, who could possibly do so, gathered on the levee.

Doctor Williamson and the Lone Hand were among the crowd as the steamer stuck her nose on the bank, making a landing after the odd fashion peculiar to the Southern rivers.

Margaret Dangerfield, accompanied by one of her schoolmates, a Miss Marie Hountonville, of New Orleans, who had made the European tour with her, and now had come to pay her a visit at her own home, were among the passengers who disembarked.

Doctor Williamson hastened to receive the ladies, introducing the Lone Hand as a particular friend, and the gentlemen were then made acquainted by Margaret with her companion.

Margaret Dangerfield was a tall, well-proportioned, beautiful girl, a decided brunette, with dark eyes and dark hair, strongly resembling her father, while Miss Hountonville, although of

one of the New Orleans Creole families, was a blonde beauty, a little below the medium size.

Margaret did not look at her best, for her face was pale and her eyes red and swollen as though she had been weeping.

The face of her sympathizing friend also told a tale of sorrow, and both the girls wore their vails down.

"She has heard the news," the Lone Hand observed to the young doctor, the moment he beheld the girls.

And when they landed and the doctor offered his arm to Margaret, he said:

"I judge that you have heard of the terrible affliction which has so unexpectedly befallen you?"

"Yes," replied Margaret, trying to choke back her tears and retain her composure, "the intelligence was brought on board at the second landing below. The captain tried to keep it from me, but I knew from the way the other passengers glanced at me that some disastrous news which nearly concerned me had been received, and I begged the captain to tell me."

"Words are but idle mockeries when such a calamity comes upon one, particularly when it strikes with the speed of lightning, as in this case," the young doctor observed.

"All I can say is that it is fate—it is the will of Heaven; and though we suffer, we cannot alter it."

"Oh, it is so dreadful!" the girl remarked, with a shudder. "And to think that my poor father should be slain in so brutal a manner!"

"Yes, it was a fearful deed, and so far not the slightest trace of the assassins can be discovered."

"Is it not strange that so foul a murder can be perpetrated and yet the villains manage to escape?" the girl asked.

"This is a wild, strange country down here, Margaret, and you will have to live here for some time before you will be able to understand either the country or the people."

"I do not want to understand them," Margaret replied, earnestly.

"I do not want to live here at all. I feel sure that I will never feel at home here after this dreadful tragedy; and now that my father is gone, there is no tie to bind me here."

"You will have to remain a certain time, of course, until the estate is settled up, and then you will be free to depart," the young doctor observed.

"I confess, Margaret, I agree with you in regard to this region. I should not like to think I would have to remain here all the rest of my life."

"I much prefer the North."

"Oh, yes; this land seems dreadful to me now!"

And again a half-shudder passed over the girl's form.

"I have made arrangements for you at the hotel," continued Williamson.

"It is not the St. Charles, nor the Fifth Avenue of New York, but it is comfortable, and the people are good-hearted folks, who will do their best to make you feel at home."

"Ah! I had little idea when I left New Orleans of the fearful shock which I was doomed to suffer," the young girl remarked, with a sigh.

"Had it not been for Marie, who has been to me like a sister, I don't know how I would have got along, for I was entirely prostrated by the sudden and unexpected blow."

"Yes, I can readily understand that."

"And the authorities, you say, cannot gain any intelligence of the cruel ruffians who killed my father?"

"No, they have not been able to gain the slightest clew to the villains; the coroner's verdict was death by the hands of unknown assassins."

"But I do not understand how it is that the villains have succeeded in escaping all search; but perhaps the authorities have not been active in the matter?"

"Well, as to that, I will do them the justice to say they have done everything in their power," the young doctor replied.

"Within an hour after news of the crime was received here in Blazing Star, the mayor and marshal, with a posse of volunteers, rode to the plantation, and, after thoroughly examining the scene of the murder, scoured the country for fully ten miles in all directions, but did not succeed in finding the slightest clew to the doers of the deed."

"You see, one of the most mysterious things about the assassination is, that there does not seem to be any reason for it at all."

"This is a wild, and in some particulars, a rather lawless country down here, and if your father had had any dispute, or trouble, with any neighbor, why then suspicion that that person might have something to do with his untimely taking off would surely be excited, for in this country trivial disputes between neighbors are often settled by recourse to violence."

"It is absolutely certain though that your father was at peace with all his neighbors, and had not had the slightest difficulty with any one of them."

"But there was a rumor down the river that

a notorious ruffian named Wildcat Jack was supposed to have something to do with the crime," Margaret remarked.

"Yes, there is such a man and his character is pretty bad, but there isn't the least bit of evidence to connect him with the crime; he is only suspected on general principles, you know," the young doctor replied.

"He is supposed to have a haunt in a bayou up the river, between Blazing Star and the Dangerfield Plantation, and as he and a companion—a man who always accompanies him, and is known as Big Black Bill—have been concerned in some pretty bad scrapes, it was only natural, when this affair happened, people should jump immediately to the conclusion that Wildcat Jack had something to do with it.

"It is the old saying over again, you see, 'give a dog a bad name and hang him.'"

"Ah, I see, but from the way the people spoke on board of the boat, I thought some proof had been secured connecting the outlaw with the crime."

"No, not a bit of proof against any one," Williamson replied positively.

"Of course there is a deal of talk. The crime was so mysterious in its nature that it has given rise to the wildest kind of surmises."

"Yes, I can readily understand that."

"I presume you were aware of the fact that a couple of young Englishmen, brothers, by the name of Dunlip, were employed by your father?"

"Yes, he mentioned them in his letters, and said they were two of the best men to manage a plantation whom he had ever seen."

"There isn't any doubt about that; they are smart fellows, understand their business perfectly, and, in addition, are two as perfect gentlemen as I ever met."

"Yet, notwithstanding this fact, certain ugly rumors are flying about town that they know more of the tragedy than they are willing to admit."

"In fact, to get right at the heart of this gossip, some of the miserable wretches here are insinuating that the two brothers committed the crime, and concocted the story of the masked robbers to screen themselves."

"What a horrible suspicion!" Margaret exclaimed.

"Yes, and it is perfectly absurd too."

"I have an idea!" the girl exclaimed, suddenly. "I am only a woman, you know, and therefore not supposed to be capable of much foresight in such matters, but would not the real murderers be apt to try to get a rumor of this sort started so as to divert suspicion from themselves?"

"You have made a shrewd guess, Margaret, for quite a number of us in the town here have come to that opinion, and we are trying to find out who first started the rumor, but, so far, we haven't been able to discover."

"I suppose I ought to communicate with judge Labodot, who was my father's lawyer as soon as possible."

"Yes, I will send a message informing him of your arrival immediately. He lives at the county seat, Richmond, some distance from here."

The arrival of the party at the hotel ended the conversation.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE MAN FROM GEORGIA.

JUST about the time that the Belle of Fulton was making her landing on the levee of Blazing Star, a highly important interview was taking place in the law office of the one legal gentleman that the town possessed.

As a rule, in the thinly settled regions of the South and West lawyers are generally to be found at the county seat, unless there are other tolerably good-sized towns in the county.

But, as Blazing Star seemed to be going ahead so rapidly this particular lawyer, attracted by the reports of its prosperity, concluded to take up his residence there.

He was a new-comer in the State—from Georgia, he said, and he gave his name as Richard Oglethorpe, but from some careless expression which he had let fall, it was gathered that he had been a Brigadier-General during the war, and so he soon became known as General Dick Oglethorpe, a title which he accepted without any protest.

In person, the lawyer was a typical Southerner. He was a tall, rather slender fellow, a man of forty or thereabouts, with a long, oval face, high cheek-bones and restless, glittering black eyes, and as he had a very swarthy complexion, he looked enough like an Indian to suggest that some of the life-blood of the red-skin ran in his veins.

His hair was jet-black and he wore it in long ringlets, carefully oiled, which came to his coat collar, and his long mustache, which drooped for an inch below his jaw-bone, was as raven black as his hair.

Altogether the general was quite a striking figure.

The reader will probably remember that the young doctor in giving a description of the town had stated that it was the opinion of the inhabitants that almost all of the settlers—who really

were making Blazing Star lively—were men passing under false names and whose records wouldn't bear inspection.

They sought in the Red River town seclusion from the vengeance of a law which they had in some way outraged.

And, as far as General Oglethorpe was concerned, he said, frankly, that he had been obliged to emigrate.

But, according to his story, it was on account of an "affair of honor," in which he had been unlucky enough to kill his man.

"I intended to only wing him, gentlemen, so as to teach the fool a lesson, upon my word of honor, I did!" the general remarked, in the lofty, stilted way in which he usually conversed.

"But just as I fired, with the intention of putting a ball through his shoulder, the donkey, almost scared out of his wits, gentlemen, moved, and as a result he got my bullet through the lungs and died three days afterward."

"He was nothing but a boy who had the impudence to openly doubt a statement I made, and of course I had to teach the young man a lesson, but times have changed in Georgia, gentlemen, since the war, and these blue-bellied Yanks have come in."

"There was so much row kicked up about this little affair, in which the impudent young rascal only got what he deserved, that I was actually obliged to get out, else I would have been tried for murder, and, possibly, might have been sent to the State Prison or hung like an infernal nigger."

We have given the lawyer's statement at length, for it gives the key to his character.

He was a true representative of the fire-eating Southerner, who prided himself upon his knowledge of the "code of honor," and was quick to resent any imputation reflecting upon his standing as a "gentleman."

Blazing Star, though, had seen just such fire-eaters, and "first-class gentlemen," as this particular general before, and his account of himself was not received with the most implicit faith.

The town didn't doubt in the least that the man had got into some trouble in the place where he had formerly resided, and had been compelled to fly to escape the heavy hand of an outraged law, and it was possible that killing his antagonist in a duel was the crime which he had committed, but Blazing Star, with rare wisdom "reckoned" that there must have been some gum-game about the encounter.

The general had taken some unfair advantage of his opponent, and therefore had been forced to make himself "scarce."

In regard to his being a Georgian and owning the name of Oglethorpe, the town didn't take any stock in that at all.

It was the general impression that he had come from some part much further north than Georgia, Virginia possibly.

And, although the general was wont to declare many times a day, emphasizing the remark with an oath: "I'm a high-toned Southern gentleman!" yet, when he came to business, Blazing Star made the discovery that he was as tricky and unscrupulous a lawyer as could be found in the whole State of Arkansas.

No client ever came into his office with a case and was allowed to go out if the general judged there was a ten-dollar bill in the thing.

The general proceeded in direct opposition to the method of Judge Labodot.

It didn't matter a copper to him whether the client stood a chance to win or not, so long as he had money to pay for law.

Oglethorpe was a fair lawyer, too, not particularly solid, but showy and taking.

A man who jumped at a point by intuition, rather than by slow and patient study, and as a natural result, he often came to a wrong conclusion.

He was a hard drinker, considerable of a gambler, and, altogether, was about as fast a man as the town of Blazing Star could boast.

A person much more apt to degrade than elevate the legal profession.

The general had his office up-stairs, over Mayor Richards's store, and, as stated at the beginning of the chapter, a highly important interview was taking place in the lawyer's office just as the Belle of Fulton was poking her nose on the levee of Blazing Star.

The mayor of the town was in consultation with General Oglethorpe.

Richards and the general had been on friendly terms ever since the lawyer's advent in the town, and the mayor was accustomed to drop in upon the general every day or two for the purpose of having a chat with him.

Some gossips of the town, disposed to censure, who had marked the growing intimacy between the two men, had wagged their heads in a wise sort of way and muttered something about "birds of a feather flock together," and other old-time sayings of similar import.

But in small places the tongue of scandal is never quiet.

On this present occasion Richards came in as usual, found the general tilted back in his arm-chair, with his feet on the desk before him, engaged in smoking.

"Aha! glad to see you, mayor!" the lawyer

exclaimed, lazily waving his hand to a chair.

"Sit down and make yourself comfortable."

"Have a weed?" and the general threw a cigar on the desk.

"Thank you, I don't care if I do."

Richards accepted the chair and the cigar, sat down in one and lighted the other.

"How's business?" he asked.

"Cussed dull!" replied the lawyer, in a disgusted way.

"It seems to me as if people nowadays don't have pluck enough to stand up for their rights."

"Well, it is a new country hyer, so to speak; not many people to go to law; but the town is growing, though, and business will steadily increase."

"Between you and me, Richards, this hyer town of Blazing Star is a God-forsaken hole, and if it wasn't for that cussed little difficulty I got into in Georgia, which keeps me from going back there, I wouldn't stay here a day."

"Oh, you take too dark a view of the situation," the mayor replied.

"If you had come hyer five years ago, as I did, when there wasn't fifty people in the place, then you might talk."

"Have patience; you'll do well enough by and by."

"Well, I hope so, but I haven't struck a case that really had any money in it since I came to the town."

"I think I can put you in the way of one now."

"You don't say so?" the lawyer exclaimed, and he took his feet down from the desk.

"Well now, you can take my head for a football if that isn't the best piece of news I have heard for a month!"

"Come! we must take a drink on that!"

The general produced a bottle of whisky and two glasses from the lower part of the desk, and the two men drank.

"Now, fire away, and let me know what is up!"

"You have heard of this Dangerfield affair, of course?"

"Oh, yes, I should think I had: the town has talked of nothing else ever since it happened."

"But what are you driving at? Have you got any clew to the men who committed the murder?"

"Oh, no, not the slightest. There are plenty of surmises and reports, you know, but no clews. The last rumor I heard was that there was a suspicion in the minds of a good many men in regard to those two young Englishmen."

"The Dunlip brothers! Yes, I heard some talk of that kind, but it is all bosh!" the lawyer exclaimed, decidedly.

"In fact, it looked to me as if some of the fellows who did the job had been instrumental in starting the report."

"Mighty stupid piece of business, you know, for there isn't any proof that they could make anything by killing the old man, and if a smart detective officer was here now he might score a point by tracing the rumor up and so get at the guilty men."

"Yes, so he might," responded Richards, touched on the raw, and yet managing to conceal the fact.

"Well, Dangerfield is dead and his heir, I believe, is his daughter who is coming up the river on the Belle of Fulton which ought, by rights, to have been hyer a week ago."

"Yes, so I have heard."

"They say that Colonel Dangerfield was worth a good big sum."

"Yes, that is the report."

"I hope it is true, but I'm afraid it ain't, for I have a claim against him for about fourteen thousand dollars."

The general was amazed.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE MAYOR'S CLAIM.

"EH, what is that?" the lawyer exclaimed, thinking that there must be some mistake about the matter, and that he had misunderstood what the other had said.

"I said that I had a claim against the Dangerfield estate for over fourteen thousand dollars."

"Well, that is a nice little sum," the general observed in a reflective way, and he looked at his visitor with an expression on his face which said almost as plainly as though it had been translated into words:

"How in the name of all that is wonderful did it happen that the colonel owed you any such sum of money?"

"Yes, fourteen thousand dollars; and that is quite a good bit of money down in these parts."

"Oh, there's no mistake about that. When a man corrals fourteen thousand dollars up along the Red here, he is inclined to put on as many airs as a millionaire."

"Here are the notes in Colonel Dangerfield's handwriting with his signature attached," Richards remarked, drawing a large pocket-book from his breast pocket as he spoke, opening it and taking out four pieces of paper which he placed on the table for the lawyer's inspection.

They were drawn on "blank notes," that is, printed forms, such as are provided by banks for the accommodation of their customers, so that

all that is required to be done is to fill in the date, the amount, the time and the names.

"Perhaps you are not acquainted though with either Colonel Dangerfield's writing or his signature," Richards remarked.

"Yes, I am," the general replied. "I sold Dangerfield some stock for a client of mine and three or four letters passed between us."

"That is lucky, for you will be able to identify the handwriting at once then."

"Oh, yes, and the colonel wrote a mighty good hand too. One of those clear, legible hands that are so easily read."

Then the lawyer examined the slips of paper which the other had placed upon the table.

There were four notes, all for different amounts and drawn at different dates, but all in the handwriting of the murdered man and bearing his signature.

The first note was for three thousand dollars, the second for five thousand, the third for two thousand and the last for four thousand; all payable on demand.

The first two notes were about four years old and the others three, six months separating them.

"These are all right; that is Colonel Dangerfield's signature, there isn't the least doubt about that," the general remarked.

"I could swear to the signature and the handwriting anywhere."

"If you notice they are payable on demand and they bear eight per cent. interest," the mayor remarked.

"So, when you come to figure it up, my claim amounts to considerably more than fourteen thousand dollars!"

"Yes, it will be a pretty heavy pull on the estate for I hear that it is rumored the colonel was not worth a great deal above what he had invested in his plantation."

"Oh, I know that a long time ago," the other observed.

"But it wasn't my business, you know, to correct false impressions so when any one asked me what I thought Colonel Dangerfield was worth, I replied, like the rest, that I supposed about half a million."

"And all the time you held these notes and knew that it wasn't so?"

"Yes."

"But I say, Richards, this claim of yours will about cut up everything if the report is true that Dangerfield's sole wealth consisted of his plantation."

"I shouldn't be surprised. Of course the fire has lowered the value of the plantation amazingly, although I suppose the buildings were insured but the stock and crops are a total loss."

"Well, counting insurance and everything the plantation isn't worth over thirty thousand dollars, and if it is forced to a sale it wouldn't fetch over twenty thousand."

"Twenty thousand would be a good price for it at an auction sale," Richards asserted.

"And you would probably have to buy the place in order to protect yourself."

"Yes; that is likely."

"Kinder rough on this gal of the colonel's," the general observed.

"Can't help that, you know; business is business."

"Well, do you want me to take hold of these notes and bring suit?"

"Yes, that was my idea. Of course you will win; there can't be any doubt about that, as everything is perfectly clear, for there's no going back on the colonel's signature, and then, besides, I've got a witness who saw Dangerfield give the notes to me."

"You see, general, I am a prudent kind of man, and when it comes to handling large notes like these hyer, I always calculate to be on the safe side; therefore, when the colonel gave me the notes, I managed to have Brandon Gazee present so he would be able to swear he saw the notes pass, if there should ever come a time when there would be a doubt raised about them."

"That was mighty prudent, Richards," and the lawyer shook his head approvingly, but there was a peculiar look in his eyes as he did so.

"Of course when a man like Colonel Dangerfield, who is popularly supposed to be worth half a million, dies, and it is discovered that he has left unpaid notes behind him to the tune of fourteen thousand dollars, it is apt to give rise to a great deal of talk, and some folks might be inclined to question whether everything is all straight or not, particularly the lawyers who represent the heirs of the dead man."

"Yes, I thought of that at the time, and that is why I took the precaution to have the marshal present when the colonel delivered the notes to me."

The lawyer did not make any reply, but took the notes up and examined them one by one, in an abstracted way, and it was plainly to be seen that his mind was busily at work upon some difficult problem.

And the question he was wrestling with was: "How on earth did Richards get hold of these notes?"

The lawyer had been long enough in Blazing Star to know that the mayor was not supposed to be a man possessed of any particular amount of wealth.

He did a good business at his store, but was altogether too fond of drinking whisky and playing poker—and he was not a lucky gambler—to put by much money.

How, then, did it happen that he held colonel Dangerfield's notes for so large a sum?

There was a mystery about the affair, and the general was too good a lawyer not to perceive that he must be well posted in regard to all the particulars, or else he could never take the case into court.

"What is the matter—do you see any trouble ahead?"

"Well, I don't exactly know, but in all cases of this kind it is best to be prepared."

"I don't think there is the least doubt that there will be a row about these notes."

"Judge Labodot, of Richmond, will probably look after Miss Dangerfield's interests, and the Judge is an ugly man to deal with."

No one knew this better than the speaker, for when he first came to the section he had attempted to browbeat the judge, being opposed to him in a law case, and had been handled in a way he despised.

Judge Labodot had given him the lie in open court, and accepted the challenge which the other sent him, and bored a hole through his shoulder with a rifle-ball with the greatest ease, and after the fight was over the general understood that the judge had held his life at his mercy, for being a dead shot, he could easily have sent the bullet through his heart instead of his shoulder.

"Now these notes appear to be all right and regular enough, but the first question will be, what was the consideration?"

"Can such a question be asked?"

"There's a mighty deal of danger, for the other side's game will be to prove that there wasn't any consideration, and that the whole thing is a fraud."

"Yes, yes, I see," and then the mayor hesitated for a moment, as if debating how best to get at the point.

"Colonel Dangerfield was very fond of a little poker game once in a while," Richards remarked.

"Yes, yes," said the lawyer, whose eyes were immediately opened by this remark, for he thought he comprehended now how the mayor had become possessed of Colonel Dangerfield's notes.

"Now, supposing the colonel and I have played poker together, and—"

"No, no, that will not do at all!" interrupted the lawyer.

"A court of law can't be used to recover a gambling debt, which is outlawed by the law."

"Now, my idea how these notes came into your possession was that the colonel, desiring to get stock, or buy more land or something of the kind, and finding himself a little short, borrowed this money from you from time to time."

"Money, you know, which you made in your business, and some of which you had when you came to Blazing Star."

"And you were glad to lend him the money at a good rate of interest, for you thought you couldn't get a better investment."

"That was the way, wasn't it?"

"Yes, exactly."

"And you can go on the stand and swear to it?"

"I can," responded the mayor, firmly.

"Do you keep any books which will show how much money per year you make out of your store?"

"No, I keep it in my head."

"You make four or five thousand dollars a year easily enough?"

"Oh, yes."

"And that is where you got the money to lend Colonel Dangerfield?"

"Certainly, of course."

"And you can swear to it?"

"I can!"

"It's all right; I'll collect the notes for you, although I reckon you will have to take the plantation in lieu of money; but you will not mind that."

"Let's have another drink!"

The two understood each other.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE JUDGE'S OPINION.

THE young doctor was as good as his word, and sent a message immediately to Judge Labodot informing him of the arrival of Miss Dangerfield.

As it happened, the old lawyer was busy, attending to an important law case and so was obliged to send word that he could not come to Blazing Star for three or four days, and that he would take great pleasure in waiting upon Miss Dangerfield as soon as possible.

It was six days before the judge was able to come and during that time General Oglethorpe, who prided himself upon the speed with which he transacted business, had commenced operations to recover the value of the notes held by Mayor Richards.

He consulted this gentleman about the matter, and came to the conclusion that it would hasten matters if they allowed Judge Labodot to see exactly how strong a case they had.

"The judge has some peculiar traits for a lawyer," the Georgian observed with a sneer.

"When a client offers a case to him he immediately constitutes himself judge and jury, and if his magnificent lordship doesn't think the thing is all right, the client can go hang for all he cares."

"Now, we have got a dead sure thing of it this time, and, on the principle of the card-player, who has an invincible hand and displays so as to save trouble, if we show the judge what kind of a hand we have got, the chances are great that, acting up to those peculiar ideas which he has in his great head, he will advise the girl not to contest the case, as she doesn't stand any chance to win."

The mayor thought that the idea was an admirable one and so the general visited Judge Labodot, explained the matter to him and, in the most generous manner possible, allowed him to examine the notes.

Now the judge was too old a stager to allow any one to see how much he was annoyed by this unexpected development.

So he merely said he was much obliged for the courtesy of the visit and when he saw Miss Dangerfield he would ascertain her wishes in regard to the matter, but, at present, not having had any consultation with the lady, he was unable to say what she would do in the premises.

General Oglethorpe took his leave with the most elaborate politeness and retired, feeling that he had won a victory, for he could see despite the old judge's attempt to disguise the fact, that he was taken by surprise by the production of the notes.

Therefore when the judge finally made his appearance in Blazing Star he brought both important and unwelcome information with him.

Doctor Williamson having been advised by the judge as to the time of his arrival received him, and the young man made haste to acquaint the lawyer with the relations which existed between himself and Colonel Dangerfield's daughter.

"I am glad to hear it!" the old lawyer exclaimed.

"Glad to learn that the daughter of my old friend will not be obliged to depend upon strangers."

The judge had made the young doctor's acquaintance some time before and had taken a liking to the gentleman.

"Miss Dangerfield is in the parlor waiting for you," Williamson remarked.

"By closing the door we can be strictly private, and can converse without fear of any one playing the eavesdropper upon us."

"That is right," the judge remarked, approvingly. "We can't be too careful in such matters."

"By the way, there is a friend of mine whom I would like to have present at the conference, if you have no objections, judge," Williamson remarked.

"He is in the legal line, although he has not practiced much, owing to other business requiring his attention."

And then the young doctor called the Lone Hand, who was seated a short distance off, and introduced him to the judge.

"L. Hand?" observed the old lawyer, with a keen glance at the face of the other.

"Yes, sir."

"Of Little Rock?"

"That is where I hail from."

"Doctor, will you excuse me if I speak a few words in private to this gentleman?" said the judge, abruptly.

"Certainly—of course. I will go and tell Miss Dangerfield of your arrival."

Then Williamson departed, leaving the two together.

"My friend, the L. Hand business is a little too thin for your uncle," the lawyer remarked.

"I have a good memory both for faces and names, and seldom forget either, and you are no stranger to me. I saw you in Little Rock, and under such circumstances as would not be apt to allow me to forget a man who was making considerable of a name for himself in a certain field."

"I mention this fact so that you will understand that I know who you are, and can govern myself accordingly."

"Yes; as I am here on business, I deemed it prudent to conceal my name, for that might be known, although my person might not be," the Lone Hand replied.

"And since you were Colonel Dangerfield's confidential man of business, I will admit to you that the colonel himself had something to do with my advent here, although my business with him was private and not public; but as this dreadful tragedy has removed the colonel from this world, I can see no objections in revealing to you what my business was with him."

"You can rely upon my discretion, of course," the old lawyer remarked.

"Ah! judge, your assurance to that effect is not necessary—your character is enough," the Lone Hand observed with a polite bow, which the old lawyer returned.

"But, to come to the object of my visit here, by accident I got on a certain track."

And then the Lone Hand related the story of the one hundred thousand dollars, winding up with the declaration that in his opinion the masked men who killed Colonel Dangerfield had been in search of the treasure.

"I am sure of it," replied the old judge, and then he related the particulars of the visit which the disguised outlaws had made to him in connection with the gold, ending his recital with the request which the outlaw chief had made in regard to dispatching a letter to Blazing Star.

"Ah!" the Lone Hand exclaimed, "that is a most important point, for that narrows the search down to this very town."

"It is evident, then, that the outlaws are either in this town themselves, or that they have confederates here."

"Yes, not the least doubt about that."

"Suppose you write a letter to this address, C. D. Gold—a very transparent device that, by the way; Colonel Dangerfield's gold, you see?"

"Yes, I saw that immediately, of course."

"Write in this way—a non-committal letter: 'If I can get a clew to the matter you spoke to me about what is the best you can do for me? I am not at all sure I can work the trick, but I might happen to stumble on it.'"

"I see, I see."

"Your visit here to Miss Dangerfield will be known to these men, if they are in Blazing Star, or have confederates here, who are on the watch, and when this letter is received, they will jump at once to the conclusion that you have got some clew in regard to the gold from Miss Dangerfield."

"Exactly, a very natural conclusion."

"We will arrange so that I will know at what time the letter will arrive here, and I will put a watch on the post-office so as to spot the man who calls for it, and in this way the chances are great that I will be able to get a clew to the outlaws."

"A capital scheme!" exclaimed the lawyer. "There's no reason why it shouldn't work: but don't it strike you as being a blunder on the part of the scoundrels to propose this letter business?"

"Oh, yes; but rascals are making such blunders all the time; the smartest of them commit just such mistakes."

"If they didn't, the officers, whose game it is to hunt them down, wouldn't have so many captures of which to boast. Half the time, by some blunder of this kind, the rogues catch themselves."

"By-the-by," and the old lawyer glanced around, cautiously so as to be certain that there wasn't any one near to overhear what he had to say, "a word of caution:

"This postmaster here, Mayor Richards, is not to be trusted, I think. I hav'n't much opinion of him and if I were you, I would not allow him to suspect the game that is on foot."

"I hav'n't any opinion of him at all, nor of the marshal, Brandon Gazee, either."

"Yes, both drink too much whisky and gamble too much to be square men."

"I have had my eyes on them ever since I came to the town."

"This mayor has just sprung a trap on me which I didn't at all expect."

"Indeed?"

"He holds Colonel Dangerfield's notes to the tune of fourteen thousand dollars."

"Is it possible?" exclaimed the Lone Hand, annoyed at the intelligence.

"Yes, that is the figure, and as they have been drawing interest at the rate of eight per cent. for three or four years, the sum total amounts to a pretty penny now."

"I should say so."

"I don't understand it at all."

At this point the young doctor returned with the intelligence that Miss Dangerfield was ready to receive them.

So the three proceeded to the parlor where sat the lady.

CHAPTER XXXII.

GETTING AT THE TRUTH.

DOCTOR WILLIAMSON introduced the judge who in a few, well-chosen words expressed his pleasure at meeting the daughter of his ancient friend, and at the same time referred in a befitting manner to the great loss which he had sustained.

By this time Margaret had schooled herself to bear the affliction which had fallen so heavily upon her, and was able to talk in regard to the calamity without being overcome with agitation.

And then the judge proceeded to business.

"The burning of your father's house was an unfortunate thing," he remarked, "for about all of the colonel's papers were destroyed, so that I am almost in the dark in regard to how his affairs stood."

"Did he ever speak or write to you in regard to his business matters?"

"Very little, sir, except that he gave me to understand he was possessed of ample wealth."

"In the last letter which I received from him

in Paris just before I sailed from home, he wrote that he was tired of running the plantation, and as he had money enough to make both of us comfortable for the rest of our lives, he thought he would sell the plantation, if he could get an offer for it anything like the real value, and then we would settle in New Orleans, which was his favorite city."

"Yes, I knew he contemplated giving up the plantation, as he told me only about a month ago, when he spoke of your coming home that he didn't propose to shut up a young girl like you in a wilderness like this upper Red River country, and he would sell his place if he could get a fair offer for it."

"And he spoke as if he was possessed of ample means on which to retire."

"But now that your father is dead, dear Miss Dangerfield, I am unable to discover any property appertaining to him with the exception of the plantation."

The girl opened her eyes widely at this intelligence.

"I do not understand it at all," she remarked.

"My father always acted as though he had plenty of money, and, as far as I am concerned, I was never stinted in the least."

"In fact, he was continually asking me if I had money enough, and he always kept me supplied in the most liberal manner."

"It is very strange," the old judge remarked, shaking his head, gravely.

"Although I was the colonel's legal adviser, and have been so for thirty years at least, yet in regard to how he stood with the world I know but little more than a comparative stranger."

"Your father was always very reserved about his private affairs, and I have an idea that, like his father before him, he was inclined to be a little bit of a miser."

"Not that I mean to say he lived in a miserly manner, or denies himself anything, but he had an odd notion of hiding his money away in strange out-of-the-way places, instead of placing it in banks, or investing in mortgages or stocks and bonds."

"In regard to that I am ignorant, sir."

"As affairs have turned out it is an unfortunate thing for you that your father possessed such an odd trait," the judge remarked, gravely. "For I feel pretty certain that the colonel had a large amount of money concealed in the house and that it was destroyed by the fire."

"If it was in bills, which is probable, for there is very little hard money in circulation in this region, it is gone—can never be recovered, and the United States' Treasury is the gainer."

Then the judge thought for a few minutes before he spoke. At last he said:

"Did your father ever say anything to lead you to suppose that he had a large amount of gold on hand?"

"No, sir."

"Never let fall any careless expression in regard to having come into possession of a large sum of gold?"

"No, sir, he never spoke to me about money at all, excepting, as I have told you, to ask me if my allowance was liberal enough, and if I didn't wish for more spending money."

The old judge shook his head and a grave look appeared on his face.

"It is as I feared," he remarked.

"The colonel has died and his secret is buried with him."

Margaret looked as if she did not comprehend, but the young doctor and the Lone Hand exchanged meaning glances.

"The story of your father's life is, possibly, not as well known to you as it might be," Judge Labodot remarked, perceiving that the girl expected an explanation.

"He was in comfortable circumstances before the war, but not rich," the lawyer continued.

"But when the end of the struggle came, like nearly all the Southern officers, he found himself a ruined man."

"All that was left was the bare plantation; he set to work to build himself up and succeeded wonderfully; so much so that he became the envy of the neighborhood, and in a very short time indeed was reported to be by far the richest man in this section."

"How your father managed to make so much money was, and is, a mystery."

"I think I got an inkling in regard to it though some nine or ten years ago, right after your father came back from the war."

"He was in my office one day and something happened to be said regarding the sums of money which had been buried by people during the war, anxious to save their cash from the raiders of both sides."

"Then the rumor that Jeff Davis, when he tried to make his way across the Mississippi, had considerable treasure with him, which the Yankees did not succeed in capturing when Davis was taken, was mentioned, and Colonel Dangerfield put the question, referring to the current report that the treasure had been buried and in some mysterious manner all trace of it lost—who is the heir to that treasure?"

"The United States Government, of course," I replied. "But I reckon the man who finds it

will have the first claim and will be apt to hold on to it, if he is wise enough to keep his mouth shut."

"Then the colonel put the question."

"If you had served the South faithfully all through the struggle from the time the war began until the conquered soldiers laid down their arms, and returned home a ruined man, yet with a couple of years' pay due you, and knew of the existence of such a treasure, would you, as an honest man, consider yourself entitled to go for it?"

"Most decidedly," I replied.

"The colonel waited for a moment as if he was turning the matter over in his mind, and then he said decidedly:

"Well, I reckon the man who found it would have as good a right to it as any one, and if I were him, hang me! if I wouldn't hold on to it."

"It struck me at the time that the colonel was not speaking without reason, and I reckoned then that he had either got hold of the money or intended to get hold of it."

The rest all nodded; they had followed the narrative with the deepest attention.

"And as years went by and the colonel went ahead so fast, I became convinced that my suspicion was correct."

"But I never said anything to him about the matter, nor he to me, excepting that about three or four months ago, the conversation between us happened to turn upon keeping money in the house, and I said that in this region a man was inviting robbery by keeping any amount on his premises and allowed the fact to be suspected."

"He didn't agree with me, and from the way he spoke I got the impression that he thought he would be able to protect himself against violence."

"And now, Miss Dangerfield, it becomes my painful duty to tell you that in my mind there isn't the least doubt that your father was killed by outlaws who were in search of this gold."

"Is it possible?" the girl exclaimed.

"Yes, it is almost certain, and this gentleman will explain my words," and the judge nodded to the Lone Hand.

"I do not think there is the least doubt in regard to the matter," our hero replied.

"But the scoundrels did not succeed in getting the gold, though, and whether any one will be able to find it, now that the colonel is dead, is a question, for I have a suspicion that it is so carefully hidden away as to defy search."

"If the treasure consisted of some hundred thousand dollars in gold, as is reported, there must still be seventy or eighty thousand dollars of it intact, for I am satisfied the colonel has not used over twenty or thirty thousand dollars, for his plantation has paid handsomely from the time he got it in running order."

Possibly if the house and its contents had not been destroyed by fire, we might have been able to obtain some clew, but as it is I fear the money is utterly lost."

"I am amazed at this strange story!" the girl exclaimed in bewilderment.

"And then, as misfortunes never come singly, you know, Mayor Richards of Blazing Star comes forward with some notes given by your father, which amount to over fourteen thousand dollars, and if the estate is forced to pay this claim, it will sweep almost everything away."

"But I do not understand how my father could possibly owe any such sum!" Margaret protested.

"Neither do I, and I feel convinced that there is something wrong about the notes, although I have examined them carefully, and if I was put under oath I should be obliged to swear that they were both written and signed by Colonel Dangerfield."

"These notes may be the work of some skillful forger," the Lone Hand observed.

"Some men are so clever with the pen that it is not any trouble for them to imitate any ordinary handwriting."

"Yes, but as the man is dead and thus not in a position to give testimony, we will have a deuce of a time, I am afraid, to prove that the notes are not all right."

"We can force the holder to show that he gave value for the notes," the Lone Hand observed.

"Yes, and that is exactly what they are prepared to do."

"General Oglethorpe, who is Richards's lawyer, called upon me and freely exhibited the notes, saying their game was so strong that they didn't mind letting me see their cards."

"They have skillfully taken advantage of the mystery which surrounds the colonel's prosperity, for now Richards declares that it was his money that helped the colonel along and produces the notes as evidence."

"Why, this is perfectly terrible!" Williamson observed. "Not only to lose a father, but now to have the little property he left taken from her."

"The cases hain't come to trial yet, and we will contest every point," the judge remarked.

"And, in the mean time, something may happen to cast a more favorable light on the subject," the Lone Hand hastened to interpose.

After a little more conversation, of no particular importance, the old lawyer took his depar-

ture, and our hero also withdrew, leaving the young doctor to comfort the sorrowing girl.

The future indeed looked black, but there's an old saying:

"It is always darkest before the dawn!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

WILDCAT JACK VISITS BLAZING STAR.

ACCORDING to agreement, Judge Labodot, after he reached home, wrote the decoy letter, which he addressed to C. D. Gold at Blazing Star and mailed it.

There was a tri-weekly hack line between the county seat and the young metropolis of Red River, and the judge posted the letter so that it would arrive at Blazing Star on Saturday afternoon.

There were only six letters in the bag, and as the old lawyer, acting on the Lone Hand's instructions, had inclosed his letter in an extremely small white envelope, and directed it in a little scrawly "back-hand," quite different from his usual bold and free style of penmanship, as if he wanted to disguise his writing, it was totally unlike any other missive in that particular mail.

The post-office was situated in the front part of Richards's store, and so it was possible for any one lounging outside of the hotel—which the reader will remember was directly next to the mayor's place of business—to see everybody who had any business at the post-office.

The hotel and Richards's store were the general lounging places of the town.

And from the time the letter arrived on Saturday afternoon, until the store shut up, which it did about eleven o'clock at night, either the Lone Hand or the young doctor kept watch on the store, so as to see who got letters.

In the little corner devoted to the post-office, there was the usual set of pigeon-hole boxes, and in one of these boxes the little insignificant white-enveloped letter reposed, solitary and alone.

It being a Saturday, the general marketing day for the country folks, there was quite a number of rural visitors in town, and nearly every one of them made it their business to call at the post office and inquire for letters, although as Williamson said to his friend:

"About one-half of those chaw-bacons never got a letter in their lives, and never expect to either, I guess, but it is the custom to rush to the post-office on Saturday, and they are not going to be out of the fashion."

It being pleasant weather, the store door was wide open, and from where the two friends sat in front of the hotel, they were able not only to see every applicant who applied for letters, but also keep watch on the solitary white-enveloped letter.

But when the post-office closed at eleven o'clock on this particular Saturday night, the letter had not been disturbed.

On Sunday, of course, the store was closed, but when it opened bright and early on Monday morning, the Lone Hand was at his post, and the first glance he gave at the post-office showed him that the letter was gone.

The Lone Hand called Doctor Williamson's attention to this fact and remarked, dryly:

"Somebody must have come for this mail yesterday."

Williamson laughed; he understood the suspicion that was in the mind of the other, for he felt sure it was the same as the one which this strange fact had caused to rise in his own.

"The mayor is a very agreeable and obliging man, I guess," he said.

"Yes, it looks like it. The decoy has worked well, for I don't think there is any doubt that it has just put me on the track of my man."

"And now that I know my game all I have to do is to weave the web around him and when he is fairly in the toils, bring him to book."

But in this world of strife there be plots and counterplots, and while the Lone Hand was following the trail as untiringly as any red Indian on the war-path, there was a scheme on foot against him.

At high noon, just as, after the Southern fashion, the inhabitants of Blazing Star were about to take their *siesta*, into the town rode the two outlaws, Wildcat Jack and Big Black Bill.

They were fully armed, revolvers belted to their waists and in the hollow of their left arms they each carried a double-barreled shot-gun.

The word was at once passed around that the pair were in town and on mischief bent.

The citizens were used to this sort of thing and understood what it meant well enough.

The outlaws had come "a-gunning" for some one.

The pair halted in front of the mayor's store, and when this movement was made the town immediately jumped to the conclusion that Mayor Richards was the game the outlaws sought.

The mayor himself did not seem to have any fear of such a thing, for he came boldly to the front of his store and nodded in the most familiar manner to the two outlaws.

"How are you, Wildcat? How-d'ye, Bill? You are reg'lar strangers. I reckon I hev'n't seen either of you in Blazing Star for a heap of Sundays."

A little crowd had gathered in the street, anxious to see the fun, and they looked with eager curiosity to see if the mayor had his weapons ready, for they doubted not that the outlaws intended to attack him.

But, as far as they could see, Richards was not prepared for war.

And many in the crowd shook their heads with a knowing air, and said to their neighbors that if they were the mayor they "reckoned" they would not be caught napping in "no sich way."

But for once public opinion was wrong.

The outlaws had not come a-gunning for the mayor.

"No, we ain't been in Blazing Star for a heap of time, and I reckon we wouldn't be in hyer now only we understand that thar ar' a heap of lies a-being told about us," Wildcat Jack remarked.

"Bill and I are 'way up on the upper Red now in the cattle business, and we hain't got much time to attend to anythin' but our reg'lar business; but when we heerd that some galoots in this hyer town was a-shootin' off their mouths pretty lively 'bout us, Bill and me allowed that we would come in and see about it."

"Now then, Mister Mayor, we ax you, fa'r and squar', we does, Bill and me, do you want us for anything?"

"No, not that I know of. I haven't heard any complaints against you. But here comes the marshal; mebbe he knows something about it," Richards answered.

Public opinion was then immediately directed to the marshal, Brandon Gazee, who came slowly up the street.

And some of the bystanders on the outskirts of the gathering took it upon themselves to warn the marshal of the probable danger which awaited him.

"Keep your eyes peeled, Gazee!" was the intimation, conveyed in low and mysterious tones.

"Wildcat Jack Smackover and Big Black Bill Cookinham are up the street talking to the mayor; they are both armed to the teeth, and it's big odds they are on the war-path."

"Shouldn't be surprised," laconically replied the marshal, seemingly not in the least disturbed by the information.

"Better look out for yourself," was the warning. "Mebbe they have come a-gunning for you."

"Oh, no; I reckon not."

Although the marshal had the reputation of being a hard man to tackle, and a tough nut to crack in a fight, yet this indifference surprised the citizens, for they did not expect he would take the matter so coolly.

If the two outlaws had come after the official, it was not the first time the town had witnessed such a sight.

About five years back, Wildcat Jack and Big Black Bill had had a difficulty with the man who was marshal of Blazing Star at that time, and the pair had boldly rode into the town to settle the "fuss."

The marshal called upon his friends for assistance, and five of them were brave enough to come forward to fight the desperadoes.

A bloody battle followed, right in the main street of Blazing Star, and although Wildcat Jack and Big Black Bill received some pretty severe wounds, yet they succeeded in killing three of the attacking party, including the marshal, and remained in possession of the field.

And the reader can understand how peculiar is the way things are managed in the country along the upper Red River, when we state that no steps were ever taken to call the two desperadoes to an account for their share in this skirmish.

The inhabitants seemed to regard it in the light of a free fight.

The marshal and his friends had gone in to take their chances, and as the outlaws succeeded in getting the best of the battle, no one had any reason to complain.

The marshal and the men who had been "wiped out" in the encounter had friends, though, who valorously declared their deaths should be avenged, but, as the average reporter would be apt to remark, "the avengers failed to materialize."

A fact which plainly brought to light the truth: that their prudence was greater than their courage.

But no one "made mouths" at the men on this account, though, for the reputation of the two desperadoes was such that it was the general opinion that any men who set out to defy them, might as well make their arrangements for their funeral before they went into the business.

Little wonder was it then that the bystanders should be surprised at the indifference manifested by the warned man.

Gazee was a pretty good marshal, but while he bore the reputation of being a plucky fellow, who would be apt to "hold his end up" in a personal difficulty, yet he had never so distinguished himself by any act of prowess as to lead the town to suppose he would not hesitate to engage in mortal combat two such desperadoes as Wildcat Jack and Big Black Bill.

The marshal sauntered slowly along, despite the warnings, apparently not in the least affected by them, and the lookers-on, in amazement, examined him closely in order to see if he had his weapons drawn in readiness for a difficulty.

But here again they were astonished.

The marshal was armed with a pair of revolvers, buckled to his waist, and the pistols could plainly be distinguished only half-concealed by the short skirts of the loose coat which he wore.

The wise men of the crowd shook their heads.

Here was Gazee, marching up to meet the desperadoes, and yet both of his weapons in their holsters.

Didn't he know that the others were prepared for war?—that before he could get a pistol out, much less cock it, a load of buckshot from the outlaw guns would be certain to end his mortal career.

It was the general opinion, that Brandon Gazee, by his foolhardiness, was tempting fate.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE DEFIANCE OF BATTLE.

As the marshal approached the mayor's store, in front of which the two outlaws sat on their horses, the crowd instinctively scattered; slowly but surely, each particular man anxious to get out of harm's way, for there wasn't a soul in the gathering who didn't feel sure that after the exchange of a few preliminary words, so as to clear the way—a little bit of courtesy, as the pugilists always shake hands before endeavoring to batter each other out of all semblance of humanity—there would come a bloody battle.

And the steady advance of Brandon Gazee had caused the marshal's stock to rise at least a hundred per cent.

Remarks regarding the courage displayed by the marshal were freely passed—in whispers though—from man to man:

"Would you have believed it?"

"Nary time!"

"I didn't think Gazee had it in him!"

"Nor I—it's as plucky a thing as I ever see'd!"

The marshal got within twenty feet of the horsemen before he came to a halt, and then he nodded to them in just about the same familiar and friendly way as the mayor.

"Hallo, Wildcat! I ain't seen you for no end of time! How ar' ye, Bill; you're considerable of a stranger too."

"Yes, we ar' in the cattle business up on the Upper Red," Wildcat Jack replied, while Big Black Bill contented himself with ducking his head in answer to the salutation.

"And we don't git much time to fool round town nowadays, you had better believe."

"But we have come into this hyer town of Blazing Star to-day on business."

"You kin bet high on that now; we come on business every time," and then the outlaw slapped the butt of his gun—lying now across the horn of his saddle in front of him, as if he had got it all ready for use—in an extremely significant manner.

Every eye was now fixed upon the marshal, who was taking the matter in such a cool way that the bystanders knew not what to make of it.

Had Brandon Gazee suddenly lost his senses?

Didn't he know the meaning of words?

Couldn't he comprehend that the outlaws were on the war-path and held him at a terrible disadvantage?

Such were the questions that the citizens asked each other, and then thinking that, perhaps, the marshal was up to snuff, and was only playing possum so as to throw the others off their guard, they looked around to see if there was any "cover" near at hand behind which Gazee could take refuge.

It had come into their minds that it was possible that the marshal was up to some dodge of this sort, but, upon inspection, they could not see any chance for him to avail himself of any cover bigger than the slender awning-ports which stood in front of Richards's store.

And surely no man in his senses would ever think of trying to escape receiving the load of a shot-gun by taking refuge behind any such scanty protection as a post four inches square.

But the marshal merely laughed at the outlaws' answer and remarked:

"Wa-al, Wildcat, it is kinder a new thing, I reckon, for you to be so busy, and I s'pose you will make a heap of money out of it, if you don't have no pullbacks."

"I reckon I'm going to try, anyway," Wildcat Jack rejoined.

"But I didn't come into Blazing Star on no cattle business to-day," he continued.

"I'm on a mighty serious call hyer, I reckon, as some parties will find out afore I get out of this hyer town."

"I'm a peaceable citizen, I am; jest as quiet a man as thar is in this hyer durned old State of Arkansaw, so long as nobody don't tread on me!"

"But I am a man, I am, every inch of me, and I'll allow I don't reckon to have anybody walk over me; now that is my horn you hear blowing, feller-citizens!" and the outlaw glared defiantly in the face of the spectators, as if to dare any one of them to say a word.

But like the old miner and the bear, there

"wasn't a man in the throng who had 'lost any desperadoes,' and so no one took any notice of the speech.

"I'm cl'ar business from the word go, I am, and I generally reckon to say just what I mean," the outlaw remarked, after a few moments' pause.

"I have heerd that thar is some folks in this hyer town of Blazing Star who have been shooting off their mouths considerably loud 'bout me, and I have jest waltzed into this burg for to put a stop to it!

"Although I did have some leetle fusses a few years ago, I reckon that now them things are all done gone, and I ain't going to have no two-legged man a-chinning 'bout me.

"I say, Mr. Marshal, you hain't got anything ag'in' me, have you?" he cried, abruptly.

The crowd, with almost breathless impatience, waited for the official's reply, thinking that peace or war hung on his words.

"Not a thing, Wildcat—not a thing!" Gaze answered, briskly.

"As far as I know—and I reckon that being marshal of this hyer town I ought to be posted as well as any one in it—thar ain't a thing standing ag'in' you."

The bystanders drew a long breath.

This seemed more like peace than war.

"Wa-al, now, I am glad to hear that," Wildcat Jack exclaimed, with a smile which displayed his yellow, fang-like teeth.

"I have jest a-been talking to the mayor hyer, and he allowed that there wasn't anything ag'in' me, and I knowed it all the time, too, and that is what makes me mad, for to think thar ar' some durned suckers in his hyer town of Blazing Star who dar' to say I ain't all right."

"Well, now, Wildcat, I am ready to take my oath that I never said anything ag'in' you!" the mayor exclaimed.

"Oh, I ain't a-talking 'bout you, Mister Mayor."

"I hope, Wildcat, that you ain't a-hitting at me," Gaze exclaimed.

"For I'll swear I never said anything against you."

"No, marshal, I ain't a-blowing my horn for you, either," Wildcat Jack replied.

"It is a durned stranger—a galoot that nobody knows anything about, and the idee of sich a man as that a-coming to Blazing Star and talking 'bout a man like me!

"I'm Wildcat Jack Smackover, I am, and I reckon I kin whip my weight in ba'r every time. And if this ar' man has got any backbone to him, I want him to come out and see me now, so we kin settle this matter right hyer!"

And as this ringing defiance fell upon the ears of the bystanders, they looked in amazement at each other, as much as to ask who was the man.

No one stepped forward, though, and so Wildcat Jack continued:

"I don't see the party I mean hyer in the street, and so I s'pose he's hiding in the hotel whar he has his hole, but I'll have him out of thar or know the reason why!"

Again the spectators looked at each other.

The speech was so plain that its meaning could hardly be mistaken.

There was only one man stopping at the hotel who could be considered a stranger, and that was the Lone Hand.

Was it, then, with the conqueror of Catfish Smith that Wildcat Jack sought a quarrel?

It looked like it.

Suspicion was soon turned into certainty, for in his next speech the outlaw called upon the man he sought by name.

"I am no sneaking coward to lie about a man behind his back!" Wildcat Jack declared.

"What I have to say to a man, I say openly and to his face, and now I want this hyer miserable lying cuss—this L. Hand, as he calls himself—to come out of his hole and face me!"

This declaration produced a decided sensation, and every eye in the crowd was turned upon the hotel.

There was a little gang of men in the doorway, comprising the landlord and some of the regular patrons of the house, but the Lone Hand was not visible, nor his friend, the young doctor.

Wildcat Jack waited for a few moments, as though he expected his words would induce the man he mentioned to come forward.

But as he did not, the outlaw spoke again.

"I reckon this cuss ain't got any more heart than a rabbit anyway!" he declared.

"But I don't keer two pins for that. He has got to take back what he has said ag'in' me, or I will give him the biggest licking that any man ever got in this hyer State of Arkansaw!"

And Wildcat Jack shook his clinched fist menacingly in the air as he made the declaration.

But there were many of the bystanders who had been a witness to the trouble between the stranger and Catfish Smith, and when they remembered how easily Catfish had been polished off by his antagonist, the thought came to them that if the outlaw tried any hiding business with the new-comer, he would be apt to wish he hadn't before he got through with the operation.

As long as he confined himself to the shot-gun, though, he was all right.

"See hyer, old man Sommerdyke, whar is this Mister L. Hand, anyway?" Wildcat Jack cried, addressing the landlord.

"I reckon he is in the house somewhere," replied the landlord.

"Don't you know?"

"No, I ain't sure of it. He was in a while ago, but he may have gone out without my seeing him."

"Send a message into the house and tell him that a gentleman is out hyer who would like to have the pleasure of saying a few words to him!" exclaimed Wildcat Jack, with elaborate politeness.

"And, by the way, you might as well tell him to make his will and get everything ready for his funeral, for as sure as I sit hyer on top of this ar' hoss, I will riddle him with buck-shot the moment I set eyes on him!

"It's me that's talking now! Wildcat Jack Smackover, and you kin bet all the money you kin raise that I kin do the trick, every time!"

And then a surprise was sprung upon Wildcat Jack which completely astonished him, being totally unexpected.

CHAPTER XXXV.

CAUGHT IN A TRAP.

THE outlaws had halted directly in front of Richards's store, as we have described, and were only about thirty feet from the hotel, between which and the major's store was a twenty-foot passageway, which led to the stables in the rear of the public-house.

The door which led into the bar-room, and at which the group with the landlord in the center were standing, was on the side, and over this door was a window which gave light to the entry on the second floor.

And at this window suddenly appeared the Lone Hand with a Colt's repeating-rifle in his grasp, the hammer up, ready for action, and he immediately covered Wildcat Jack with the weapon.

Never was there a surprise more complete!

Only about thirty feet between the muzzle of the rifle and the persons of the outlaws.

If the stranger possessed the least skill as a marksman, it was evident he held the life of the desperado at his mercy.

Wildcat Jack's shot-gun was lying across the pommel of his saddle in front of him, and there was not the least doubt that at the first attempt of the outlaw to seize the gun his antagonist would put a ball through him.

Wildcat Jack fairly grew white with rage when he realized how completely he was in the power of the man whom he had defied, and he inwardly cursed his own foolishness which, by compelling him to "show off" before the townsmen, had led him into the trap.

"Here I am, you foul-mouthed scoundrel!" the Lone Hand said sternly; "and now, what will you give for your life?"

The moment the Lone Hand made his appearance at the window with the rifle, all the citizens who were standing near the outlaws, and thereby fancied that there was danger of their being within range of the firing when it opened, as they hadn't the least doubt that it would in a few minutes, took to their heels and retreated from the neighborhood in short order.

They stood not upon the order of their going, but went!

Wildcat Jack was so overcome by rage when his unpleasant predicament was made known to him, that it was a few moments before he could speak.

He was worrying his brains to discover some way to get out of the scrape.

First he thought of trying the old dodge—provoking the fire of his opponent, and then forcing his horse to rear, so that the animal would receive the ball in his breast, but as he was sitting sideways toward the Lone Hand, facing the store, it was not possible to put his desire in operation.

Rack his brains as he would, he could see no way of escape open to him.

At last, in desperation he called out:

"You don't dar' to give me a fair show!"

"And what fair show, you red-handed murderer, did you ever give to any one of your victims?" retorted the Lone Hand.

"Is it not your rule to always take your man by surprise, and then kill him in cold blood, without giving him any chance to defend himself?"

"Isn't that the code down in this section that when two men are at war, it is the duty of each one of them to be continually on the lookout, and the fellow who can contrive to surprise the other is the best man of the two?"

Upon the faces of the bystanders appeared a general expression of assent, and a few of them went so far as to nod their heads; but so great was the terror in which the citizens stood of the desperadoes, that they hesitated to give open expression to anything which they thought would offend the pair.

"Wasn't I going to give you a fair show?" the desperado growled.

"Wasn't I calling upon you to come out and

face me like a man? That wasn't taking you unawares, was it? Wasn't that giving you the squarest kind of a deal?"

"Oh, yes, you intended to give me a good show for a fight!" the other cried, sarcastically.

"Your gun is on your lap there, all cocked and ready for action, and if I had been fool enough to come out to meet you, according to your invitation, the moment I made a motion to draw a weapon to defend myself, you would have shot me down, you black-hearted scoundrel!"

"Oh, jest you give me a chance to show you what I am made of!" yelled Wildcat Jack, fairly furious with rage, and yet, reckless desperado as he was, he did not attempt to make a move to grasp his weapons.

He was a man, too, who by a hundred desperate acts had fully proved that he did not set a great value upon his life.

But it was the old story over again.

He was cowed by his opponent.

There was something in the blazing eye of the Lone Hand which convinced the outlaw that if he attempted to grasp his weapon the other would surely kill him.

And, reckless desperado as he was, now that he was face to face with death, as it were, he hesitated to be ushered with so little ceremony into the presence of the grim king of terrors.

"Give up your weapons both of you!" commanded the Lone Hand, sternly.

The outlaw glanced around them, almost frantic with rage, and the mayor thought it was about time he had something to say in the matter.

"I say, gentlemen, look a-hyer now, don't you think this has gone far enough?"

And he advanced from the store, as though with the idea of getting in between Wildcat Jack and the man in the window.

"Mayor Richards, if you advance another step to interfere on the behalf of this red-handed scoundrel I will drive a ball plumb through your heart!" cried the Lone Hand, sternly.

The face of the mayor flushed.

"Oh, see hyer, that ain't no way to talk!" he expostulated.

"Do you suppose I will let you or any man on earth step in between me and my game!" the other cried, an angry menace in his clear, ringing tones.

"Wa-al gentlemen, I only interfered for to make peace."

"To make peace because you see this desperado is in a trap and you want to aid him!"

Clear and distinct came the accusation and a murmur arose on the air from the throats of the citizens as they listened to the charge.

Richards saw at once that he had made a mistake in interfering, and as he looked around suspicion was written on every face.

"Oh, no, no, I ain't taking any sides in this hyer business!" he declared.

"I hated to see any fuss and thought I would do what I could to settle the matter."

"You wasn't anxious to interfere though until you saw that I had this scoundrel in a tight place, and it looks to me as if you wanted to interfere so as to help him out of it."

Again there was a murmur among the crowd and many heads were shaken in an ominous manner.

"Why didn't you have something to say in the interest of place when this ruffian was uttering his threats of what he was going to do when he ran across a certain party?"

"That's so—that's so—that's the talk!" and similar expressions came loudly from the lips of the lookers-on.

About all the men in Blazing Star had gathered on the spot by this time, attracted by the "discussion."

Nearly every man was armed and now that the outlaws were caught in a trap the townsmen were disposed to be a little ugly.

Wildcat Jack, with his nails cut and a muzzle clapped upon his mouth, was quite a different creature from the desperado, ranging free, with his shot-gun in his hands.

"Gentlemen, it is all right—I ain't taking no sides in this matter, and you can bet your life on it too!" exclaimed the mayor, in his smoothest way, anxious to allay the feeling which he saw was rising against him.

"If these parties want to fight their quarrel out, it is no business of mine. I wash my hands of the full affair!"

Richards could plainly see that quite a number of the citizens had their weapons out, ready for action, taking advantage of the fact that the desperadoes were held at bay by the rifle of the Lone Hand.

Another thing, too, the mayor had noticed.

Forth from the door of the hotel—moving out quietly, so as not to attract attention—Doctor Williamson and the two young Englishmen, the brothers, Dunlip, had come, and all three were armed with repeating rifles, and the moment that Richards saw them, he made up his mind it was a pre-arranged plan for the three to assist the stranger in the event of an open struggle.

Decidedly the fortunes of war were against the desperadoes, and when they rode into the town of Blazing Star that day they were entering about as complete a trap as could be formed.

"Give up your weapons, both of you!" thundered the Lone Hand.

"Sommerdyke, you are a square man, take the arms!" the speaker continued.

"What charge do you make against these men?" the mayor inquired, very politely.

"No charge at all, but I want them to give up their weapons so that there will not be any likelihood of their hurting anybody, and then, as this scoundrel has openly said he would give me a hiding, I am going to give him a chance to try it on."

The spectators looked at each other in amazement, while a puzzled expression appeared on the faces of the desperadoes, as if they didn't exactly know what to make of it.

It did not seem really possible to them that when a man got his foe so completely in his power as the Lone Hand had Wildcat Jack, that he could possibly make up his mind to let him go.

To give up the satisfaction of being able to send him to the other world, for the doubtful alternative of giving him a sound thrashing.

"You propose a fisticuff match," the mayor remarked.

"Exactly. It will give me a deal of satisfaction to hammer this ruffian until he howls for mercy!" the Lone Hand replied.

"Durned if any man in your boots will be able to make me howl!" cried Wildcat Jack, who prided himself upon his abilities in the fighting line.

In his younger days he had been renowned, and the champion of his section, as a rough-and-tumble fighter.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE FIGHT.

"GIVE up your weapons and I stand ready to give you all you want in the fighting line with nature's weapons!" Lone Hand declared.

"As I said, it will give me the most intense pleasure to pound you until you are glad to cry for mercy."

"You'll never hear no cry out of me!" Wildcat Jack exclaimed, fiercely, furious at the idea of such a thing.

"Then, after I polish you off, if your companion is anxious for a taste of my quality, I will be glad to oblige him," the stranger remarked.

Now it was an odd fact that although Big Black Bill was a perfect giant of a fellow, yet he had never been concerned in a fist fight in his life.

His ideas did not run in that direction at all.

"I ain't worth shucks as a wrestler, and don't put myself up for no fighter with fists," he made reply.

"But if you whale Wildcat and want to have a try at me, I am your man at any weapon you kin name, but no fist business, 'cos I don't take no stock in that kind of fighting."

"All right, I will accommodate you, and give you the choice of weapons too!" the Lone Hand exclaimed, immediately.

And all the crowd looked at each in wonder as this bold announcement fell upon their ears.

Most certainly a fairer proposition had never been made public since Blazing Star had a local habitation and a name.

"Now then, landlord, oblige these gentlemen by relieving them of the weapons," the Lone Hand continued.

"Sart'only, sart'only, anything to oblige," the old man exclaimed as he hastened forward.

It was with very ill-grace indeed that the desperadoes surrendered their weapons, and it was plainly to be seen that if they had not been taken so completely at a disadvantage they would not have submitted to such a humiliation.

But they were in a trap—one from which they could see no possible escape—and so they were obliged to comply with the command.

"Now light down from your horse, and, fellow-citizens, clear a ring there so we will have room for the picnic!" the Lone Hand exclaimed.

The townspeople were eager to oblige the stranger who had proved himself to be made of such good material, and they immediately fell back, leaving an open square with the outlaws in the center.

"Now, Doctor Williamson, all the town knows that you are a square man, and I want you to act as master of ceremonies," the Lone Hand remarked.

"All right! I will be glad to accept the post!" said the young doctor, advancing with the repeating rifle carried in the hollow of his arm.

"And the two brothers, Duulip, here are armed too and they will assist me."

The Englishmen stepped forward then, also carrying their rifles in the hollows of their arms, and the desperadoes exchanged glances when they saw this "array" and noticed how well they were weaponed.

Both Wildcat Jack and Big Black Bill were shrewd fellows enough in their way, and in this present instance they comprehended, without the necessity of any one explaining the matter to them, that if they had attempted to show fight on the appearance of the Lone Hand, counting upon the assistance of some confederates in the crowd, these well-armed men would have taken a hand in the fun, and, most cer-

tainly, would have succeeded in rendering the fight an extremely lively one.

"Dog-gone me! if we didn't run into a reg'lar trap hyer," Wildcat Jack muttered in an undertone to Big Black Bill as the pair dismounted from their horses.

"You kin bet your life on that! A reg'lar hornets' nest, and no mistake!"

"And the fool has made the biggest mistake of his life in letting us git out of it," Wildcat Jack observed.

"Yes, I reckon that if we had him in sich a fix we would have socked it to him all we knew how," the other returned.

"You bet we would!" Wildcat Jack exclaimed, emphatically.

"But, as it is, he has given me just the chance I want, and I will go in to whale blazes out of him!"

The assurance was given decidedly enough, and yet, although Big Black Bill nodded his head as much as to say that he hadn't the least doubt about the matter, yet there was an expression in his eyes, as he surveyed his comrade and then looked at the muscular, well-developed stranger, which seemed to say that there was considerable doubt in his mind as to whether Wildcat Jack would be able to fulfill the contract which he had taken.

Most decidedly the advantage of size and weight was with the other man.

Still, the desperado, although a little undersized, was wonderfully strong, and as quick as the animal whose name he bore.

He might be able to pull through all right, but there was a decided doubt in regard to this in Big Black Bill's mind.

The big desperado was not the only one who had doubts in regard to the matter.

Taking advantage of the movements of the crowd when they had retreated for the purpose of forming a ring, the mayor and marshal had drawn together, and as all eyes were fixed upon the outlaws when they went through the ceremony of surrendering their weapons to the landlord, the pair were able to hold a brief conversation without any of the rest taking particular notice of the fact.

"Wildcat Jack has made an infernal bad break this time," Gazee observed.

"Oh, yes, not a doubt about it," the mayor replied, in a disgusted sort of way.

"The chances are big that this fellow will whale him like blazes!"

"Yes, I don't think there is the least doubt about it."

"The man is physically Wildcat's superior, and then from all accounts he knows how to handle himself."

"You heard about how he pretty near killed Catfish Smith, didn't you?"

"Oh, yes," the marshal replied. "I didn't see the fight, but I heard about it from men who did, and they say he handled Catfish without any trouble, and Smith is a pretty good man, too, when he gets fire-water enough in him."

"I saw the whole affair from beginning to end," Richards remarked.

"Smith stood no more chance with him than a hawk would with an eagle."

"Wildcat allers was too darned smart," the marshal grumbled.

"He had to ride into the town and show off in this ridiculous fashion, and he blowed around hyer so long about what he was going to do that this stranger had plenty of time to get ready and spring a trap upon him."

"Yes, that is true enough," the mayor admitted.

"But Wildcat is one of those infernal stubborn men whom you can't talk to."

"He thinks he knows it all, and when it comes to a scrape of this kind he is bound to have his own way."

"It would just serve him right if this fellow were to whale him so that he wouldn't be able to get up for a month; it might knock a little sense into him."

"That's so! And I reckon, from the outlook, that's a right smart chance that things will go about that way," the marshal observed, with a wise shake of the head.

By this time the combatants were ready for the fray, and the pair suspended their conversation to gaze upon the fight.

The Lone Hand had descended to the street, laid aside his weapons, removed his coat, and advanced to meet his opponent.

Wildcat Jack had also stripped for the fight.

As the two men faced each other, the immense advantage the stranger possessed over the outlaw in height, weight and length of reach was plainly apparent; and as the bystanders noted it, the old-time Western expression was passed from man to man:

"I reckon Wildcat Jack has bit off more than he kin chaw!"

A moment the opponents faced each other; and then, with the spring of a tiger, the desperado leaped upon his foe.

Very little of a boxer was Wildcat Jack. He was a rough-and-tumble fighter, pure and simple.

His whole idea of fighting consisted of closing in with his foe and bringing him to the ground as soon as possible.

Biting, kicking, "bucking" and gouging were all allowable, according to his rules.

If there had been any professional pugilist present, he could have immediately told, from the way in which the Lone Hand carried himself, that he was no stranger to the "manly art of self-defense."

And a moment after Wildcat Jack made his desperate rush upon his antagonist, he woke to the consciousness that in all his encounters he had never faced such a foe as this.

For, as he rushed upon the Lone Hand, his opponent, calculating the distance with the skill of a practiced boxer, met him with a terrible right-hander, which, catching Wildcat Jack directly between the eyes, felled him as if he had been shot.

Down he went, flat on his back, and with a sensation in his head as though a good-sized house had suddenly fallen upon him.

"A loud 'ah!' came from the lips of the bystanders, as they gazed with wonder at the sight.

It was the best blow ever struck in the streets of Blazing Star.

A moment Wildcat Jack lay on his back, dazed by the stroke, and then, recovering himself, sprung to his feet and made another desperate rush at his antagonist.

The first blow had not taught him anything, for he was so innocent of all knowledge of the art of boxing that he thought the stroke was a chance one.

But on this second rush he was met with another terrible blow, which fell on the right cheek this time, and again he went to the earth.

It was not a clear knock-down as in the first instance, for he had perceived the blow, had endeavored to avoid it, and therefore it had not alighted with the force of the first stroke.

Again the desperado sprung to his feet, not quite so nimbly this time as before, for he was just beginning to get the impression that these terrible blows were no chance strokes but carefully calculated ones, and the idea came into his head that if he imitated his opponent's mode of fighting and kept off instead of coming to a clinch he would do better.

So when he rose to his feet he did not rush wildly at the Lone Hand but sparred, in imitation of the other.

This was exactly what his antagonist wanted, for the stranger burned to inflict all the punishment he possibly could upon the desperado.

Cautiously the two sparred for a few minutes, Wildcat Jack clumsily, the other with all the ease and grace of a trained pugilist.

Then the Lone Hand again "measured" his man, feinted at the head, that is pretended to aim a stroke there, and when the other in a great hurry tried to guard against the blow, taking advantage of the opening thus offered the Lone Hand delivered a terrific blow with his left hand which, landing on the ribs, resounded like the stroke that the player gives to the big drum.

Down again to the earth went the outlaw. Never in all his life had he received such a stroke.

And a general hum of approval arose from the crowd as they witnessed these telling blows.

Such a sight as this the town of Blazing Star had never seen before, and the citizens appreciated the "treat."

Slowly the outlaw rose to his feet after this downfall.

Already he was sick of the task he had undertaken.

Wildcat Jack was no idiot, although he was in the habit, in the spirit of bravado, of doing foolhardy things once in a while.

Although the fight had not been going on for over five minutes, yet he was sick and sore.

Never in all his life had he got such a thrashing as he had already received.

Gladly would he have quit the game and acknowledged he was a beaten man if his pride had not been so great.

But the idea that he, the desperado, the man who for so long had been the terror of the upper Red River should be so easily beaten by this stranger, and at his own game too, for he had a high opinion of his prowess as a fist-fighter, was more than he could bear.

Then too, in this encounter, so far, he had not been able to bring into play his favorite tactics; he had not closed with his antagonist.

The other *might* be the better boxer.

In fact, as Wildcat Jack was compelled reluctantly to admit to himself, there wasn't any doubt about this, yet if he could only get the others in his grip, so as to give one of the genuine Arkansas bear-hugs, the story of the contest might be decidedly altered.

So, upon arising to his feet again, the desperado did his best to keep his antagonist from striking him, and at the same time sought for an opportunity to clinch with him.

At last he succeeded in his design, and he and the Lone Hand were locked together in a desperate hand-to-hand struggle.

Then—Wildcat Jack never was able to explain exactly how it happened—the Lone Hand, with a sudden twist, got the desperado's head under his left arm, "in chancery," to use the ex-

pression dear to the hearts of sporting editors, and holding it there with so firm a grip that Wildcat Jack was almost strangled, with his powerful right hand he administered the most terrible punishment.

Frantic with pain, the desperado at last succeeded in breaking loose, and as he staggered away the Lone Hand followed him up, and with another terrible blow on the ribs sent the desperado again to the earth.

This time Wildcat Jack manifested no intention of getting up until fully five minutes had expired, and the citizens were beginning to grow impatient for the "fun" to go on.

"Time! time!" was called out by a score of voices.

Blazing Star might be on the Upper Red River, remote from the gilded haunts of civilization, but its citizens knew what the usages of good society were when it came to conducting a prize-fight.

Slowly Wildcat Jack rose to his feet, so exhausted by the punishment he had received as hardly to be able to stand.

"No time for me," he muttered, hoarsely. "I've got enuff."

"Didn't I tell you I would thrash you until you were content to cry quits!" exclaimed the Lone Hand.

"Outlaw, scoundrel that you are, I spared your life when I had you covered by my rifle, so I would not cheat the hangman of a job!"

"You are too much for me," muttered the desperado, "but mebbe I will git even with you some day."

But the threat was not uttered with Wildcat Jack's old-time ferocity.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A COOL PROPOSITION.

"LEMME git out of this hyer town as soon as I kin, fer I'm a whipped man; my comb is cut, and it will be a long time afore I do any more crowing around these diggings," the outlaw continued.

Big Black Bill hastened to the assistance of his friend, for Wildcat Jack was so completely used up that it was as much as he could do to stand.

"Now, then, it is your turn to step up to the captain's office," the Lone Hand remarked, addressing Big Black Bill.

"If it is all the same to you, I reckon I ain't a-bankering fer any of this in mine," the big outlaw replied, doggedly.

"Oh, you are going to show the white feather—going to crawfish, eh?" exclaimed the Lone Hand in contempt.

"Yes, I reckon that is about the size of it," the outlaw rejoined, unabashed by the sneering looks of contempt which appeared on the faces of the citizens as they beheld this "clean" back-down.

"Well, you are big enough to have some pluck," the Lone Hand remarked.

"So I have; I've got a heap of pluck, but I have got some sense into me along with the pluck," Big Black Bill replied, sturdily.

"Do you s'pose I am fool enuff for to let you git a chance to salivate me?"

"Wa-al, now, you kin bet all the wealth you will ever git hold of in this hyer world that I ain't anxious fer any sich thing!"

"You kin say what you like; you kin make all the faces at me you please, but I ain't anxious for to have anythin' to do with you."

"Thar's nothing of the hog 'bout me. I allers know when I get enuff, and this hyer time I reckon I have got enuff afore I begin."

The bystanders laughed outright, and some contemptuous remark regarding the big fellow's lack of courage were flung at him.

And yet for all that, there wasn't a man in the crowd who did not believe that Big Black Bill was acting wisely in declining to meet the Lone Hand in battle array.

The outlaws departed and Blazing Star resumed its normal condition again.

A couple of days after this incident, Judge Labodot paid another visit to the town and held a second consultation with Miss Dangerfield and her friends.

The judge said frankly that he had done his best in the case, but he did not see what possible defense he could put in to prevent the payment of the notes.

"Has suit been brought yet?" the Lone Hand asked, thoughtfully.

"No, not yet. General Oglethorpe said he would wait a week or so to give me time to look into the matter, for he said it was his opinion that when I examined the case I would come to the conclusion that some compromise had better be made, and by gad! sir, I think the fellow is right!"

"I hate to make the confession, but it is the truth."

"If we can only hold the affair off for a couple of weeks I think matters in that time will so develop themselves that there will be some chance for us."

The judge shook his head.

"You don't think it can be done?"

"No, hardly; court begins next week and the suit will be brought then unless we agree to a compromise."

"If it does not come up this time when is the next session?"

"Next month."

"Four weeks hence?"

"Yes."

"That will do; that gives me the time I want," the Lone Hand remarked.

"General Oglethorpe is the counsel on the other side?"

"Yes."

"Suppose at the last moment the general should not appear?"

The judge opened his eyes at this suggestion.

"Well, the party would probably engage another counsel."

"Suppose we retain every lawyer in the county on our side?"

"Aha!" exclaimed the old lawyer, beginning to comprehend the plan of the other.

"It can be done?"

"Undoubtedly!" cried the judge.

"But they might get a lawyer from another county."

"True, but that takes time. The court only sits three days this month; the docket is a short one, and before a lawyer could be got from another county, and he would have time to make himself acquainted with the case, the sessions would be over."

"That is the game we will play. I will see that the general will not appear."

The Lone Hand spoke in such a confident manner, that the others felt satisfied that he would be able to keep his word.

Then the judge related how he had received an answer to his letter to C. D. Gold and gave the missive to the Lone Hand.

"Good! the scheme is working and soon our game will be in a trap from which there will be no escape!" the man-hunter declared.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

AN UNEXPECTED MOVE.

TIME moved on until the evening came, which preceded the day upon which the county court was to convene at Richmond, the county seat.

General Oglethorpe, accompanied by Mayor Richards, had ridden over to see Judge Labodot.

The mayor had discreetly remained at the hotel while the lawyer interviewed the judge.

But that gentleman was extremely non-committal.

"Miss Dangerfield had not made up her mind about the matter and he really could not say what she intended to do."

And when the general remarked that he thought it was about time she came to some decision, as the court would be in session on the following day, the old lawyer replied that it was his intention to come over to Blazing Star that afternoon for the purpose of inducing the young lady to make up her mind in regard to the case; he would see the general that evening at the hotel and post him in regard to the matter.

Mayor Richards did not feel at all satisfied with the way things were going, and on the homeward ride said as much to the general.

"Well, I really don't see why you shouldn't be satisfied," the lawyer remarked.

"Everything seems to be progressing favorably."

"Yes, but is not this delay rather suspicious?"

"How so?"

"Doesn't it look as if they were putting us off in regard to what they are going to do, so as to get time to spring some trap on us?"

The Georgian laughed.

He was one of those men who have so high an opinion of their own abilities that they do not believe there is anyone in the world much smarter or shrewder than themselves.

And this idea of the other seemed utterly ridiculous to him.

"Of course you are not a lawyer, and as a layman you speak," the general observed in his peculiar, lofty way.

"If you were a lawyer and were acquainted with the ins and outs of such matters as this one in question, you would not make any such speech."

"But I will see if I can't make the matter plain to you."

"The question before the meeting is, what trap can be sprung?"

"In regard to that, of course, I am in ignorance, but the delay makes me suspicious."

"Yes, yes, I can understand that, but there is not the slightest reason in the world why you should be so."

"Now, the matter seems to be perfectly plain to me, and I should be willing to stake my reputation as an advocate that I am correct in my views."

"Miss Dangerfield is a woman—women are not reasoning creatures. Judge Labodot has explained the case to her giving the information that there isn't a chance for the estate to evade the payment of the notes."

"She, woman-like, hesitates to agree to a compromise, under the belief, born of her ignorance, that some fortunate accident may occur which will materially change the face of affairs."

"The judge knows better—he knows that everything is as straight as a string and if the case is fought they will be beaten."

"And knowing women as I do—and the fair sex has cost me many a dollar and many an hour's anxiety in my time—I feel perfectly satisfied that, at the last minute, Miss Dangerfield will instruct the judge to fight the case."

"Yes, that is my opinion also. I do not think there is any doubt in regard to it, and I had a suspicion that all this delay was simply for the purpose of working some trick."

"They intend to fight, and have, all along, but in order to gain time, to spring some trap upon us, they have pretended that they didn't know what they would do."

Again the general smiled at the ignorance of the other.

"My dear mayor," he exclaimed, "you are setting up a man of straw to knock down."

"There hasn't really been any delay. Nothing could be done until this court meets to-morrow, and to-night we receive their ultimatum."

"Oh, I suppose it is all right," Mayor Richards observed, slowly.

"But I have had a suspicion all along that Judge Labodot was getting ready some mine to explode beneath our feet."

The general laughed outright at this admission.

"Oh, no, no!" he exclaimed.

"The judge is a good lawyer, I will admit that; but he is only a man and can't work miracles, and when it comes to tricks and traps, such things are much more in my way than in his, for he doesn't take much stock in that sort of thing, while I do."

"And now, as a lawyer, fully posted in regard to the case, I say to you, that if I were on the opposing side, and was requested to rack my brains to find some device to stop the payment of these notes, I couldn't do it."

"The case is too clear; it can't be done!"

"Are you all ready for action in case they conclude to fight?"

"Not exactly! a few hours' work will put things all in trim though," the lawyer replied, carelessly.

The general was noted for his dilatory way of doing business.

"I calculate to put in my toil to-night," he continued.

"My head always works clearer after midnight than before. Everything is quiet then and conducive to thought."

"I will see the judge this evening—I agree with you that the ultimatum will be war—then, take a few 'bowls' with the 'boys,' enjoy a couple of hours of genial social intercourse, after that comes a snooze for about two more, which will bring it to one o'clock, and then I will set to work; that is the way I do business."

"All right, you know best, but we must be prepared."

"Oh, yes, we will be!"

The general was always very confident, and sometimes this trait played the mischief with his plans.

Judge Labodot came to Blazing Star that evening as he had arranged, held a consultation with Miss Dangerfield, which lasted so long that it was not until after nine o'clock that he was able to call upon the general.

As had been anticipated the lady's voice was for war.

"She thinks she ought to contest the matter, even if she's beaten, just for the name of the thing," the judge explained.

Mayor Richards had been anxiously waiting for the decision and when he learned it said:

"It is as I expected; it doesn't matter; we will win of course, if they hav'n't some trap to spring upon us."

"Ever harping on my daughter," as the poet says," quoted the general, whose quotations were generally slightly incorrect.

"Well, you'll have everything ready?"

"You bet!"

"I've got a little business which will carry me out of town to-night and so I will meet you at Richmond to-morrow."

"Ay, we will meet at 'Philippi!' exclaimed the lawyer, theatrically.

Then the two parted.

As the general had announced, after the mayor took his leave, he made his way to the hotel bar-room where, in company with half a dozen kindred spirits, the lawyer enjoyed what he was pleased to consider a good time.

This social recreation consisted in disposing of a vast quantity of liquor, and the entire party amusing themselves "between drinks" by "swopping lies," to use the Western expression.

About eleven o'clock the party began to thin out, and the lawyer was thinking of retiring when the Lone Hand and Doctor Williams came into the saloon.

As it had happened General Oglethorpe had been one of the few men in Blazing Star who had not seen the fight between the stranger and the desperado, being out of town at the time.

The lawyer had heard the particulars, though, and regarded them as grossly exaggerated, for he did not believe the quiet and reserved stranger was such a terrible fighter.

General Oglethorpe had been drinking more freely than usual on the occasion and was just in the mood to be ready to take offense upon slight provocation.

By accident, apparently, the Lone Hand succeeded in exciting the general's anger.

The two were standing side by side at the bar, and the lawyer was just in the act of raising his glass to his lips, when the stranger turning to speak to the landlord jostled his elbow, causing the spilling of the liquor.

"That was cussedly clumsy, sir!" exclaimed the lawyer.

The tone was one calculated to give offense, and the Lone Hand was prompt to "take it up," much to the surprise of the landlord, who remembered how patient the Lone Hand had been with Catfish Smith, when that worthy tried to force a quarrel on him.

"If a man is all elbows he must expect to have them jostled once in a while!" the Lone Hand declared.

It was not so much the matter of the speech as the manner that caused offense.

The lawyer grew red with rage.

"Do you mean to insult me, sir? By George! for two pins I would pull your nose!"

Splash! came the liquor in the Lone Hand's glass full in the face of the general.

The lawyer, with a cry of rage, hurled his tumbler at the head of the offender and then reached for his revolvers.

But the Lone Hand was equally quick, and had the lawyer "covered" before he could cock his weapon.

Then the lawyer demanded a fair show, which the Lone Hand was prompt to grant.

Out into the street went the two to fight a duel with revolvers by the light of the calm and peaceful moon.

The Georgian met his master, and the first exchange of shots left him lying helpless upon the ground with a bullet through his chest.

"A very dangerous wound," announced Doctor Williamson, after the lawyer had been removed to a room in the hotel, "and he must be kept perfectly quiet."

The opinion was correct, for when morning came the general was raging in a fever.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

TRAPPED AT LAST.

GENERAL OGLETHORPE did not put in an appearance at Richmond, and Richards, who was anxiously awaiting him, was astounded when some of the Blazing Star people brought the intelligence of the moonlight fight.

"Curse the luck!" he cried angrily.

"But I was right, though; my presentiments did not deceive me!"

"I knew that they were hatching up some trick, but I didn't calculate upon their playing any game of this sort."

"It is all a plot, of course, the general is laid up so he will not be able to appear for me, but that will not make much difference, for there are plenty of other lawyers, and they will not gain much by this move."

But the mayor, when his reflections ran this way, did not understand how deep was the game his adversaries were playing.

Inside of an hour, though, he came to the conclusion that the combination against him was stronger than he thought, for when he went to engage a lawyer to take his case in the absence of General Oglethorpe, he found that there wasn't one in town who would have anything to do with it.

"Sorry, I would like to act for you, mayor, but, the fact is, I am retained by the other side," was the invariable reply.

And nearly every lawyer in the county, too, was present at this term of court.

There were a couple in Rocky Comfort who were not present, and Richards set off, post haste, to see if he could engage one of them, but here luck was against him.

When he arrived at Rocky Comfort—and it was a long, dreary ride—he discovered that both of the men he sought had started for Richmond, and he had, by some accident, missed them on the way.

Back again to Richmond the mayor hurried.

Again fate seemed to delight in throwing obstacles in his way; his horse lost a shoe on the road, without his noticing it, and then "picked up a nail," which rendered the beast dead lame.

So Richards did not get back to Richmond until the last court day.

And then when he sought the two Rocky Comfort lawyers, great was his disgust when they replied to him, in almost exactly the same words that the rest of the legal lights had used.

"Sorry—like to do it—retained on the other side!"

The trap had been a successful one; court days were over, and the case couldn't be heard for another month.

"And it is to this cursed L. Hand I am indebted for this!" the mayor muttered, as with rage tearing at his heart, he took his way back to Blazing Star.

When Richards returned the general was out of danger, and able to receive visitors.

The lawyer listened with the greatest interest to the recital of what had taken place at the county seat.

"Oh, yes, there isn't the least doubt that it was all a prearranged plan," he admitted.

"The man came into the saloon on purpose to

pick a quarrel with me, and I had just liquor enough on board to make me ugly, and so made an ass of myself."

"But, I really don't see what particular advantage the other party has gained, excepting a brief delay."

"In the end we will win, and the devil himself can't prevent it!"

But Richards was not at all satisfied with this assurance, and though he didn't say much to the lawyer, yet to his intimate, the marshal, he confided his opinion.

"It is this infernal stranger, this L. Hand, who has done all the mischief!" he declared. "And if we could only contrive to get him out of the way, everything would be all right!"

"Yes, but it is the old story of belling the cat, ain't it? You remember the yarn? The rats thought if they could put a bell on the cat, they wouldn't have any difficulty in keeping out of her way, but the trouble was to find some way of putting on the bell."

"All thought it ought to be done, but none of them were anxious to do it."

"I understand; you think we will not be able to either kill this fellow or drive him out of the town?"

"Yes, it strikes me the job will be a difficult one."

"One thing is certain, neither Wildcat Jack nor Big Black Bill will tackle the thing. They have got all they want of this Mister L. Hand."

"Oh, but it is ridiculous to think that the man can't be silenced!" the mayor declared, angrily.

"You and I, Gazee, could do it, if we planned carefully, so as to take him unawares—not give him a chance to show fight, you know."

"Oh, of course it is easy enough for you to say that, but, somehow, men of this Mister L. Hand stamp have an ugly habit of not allowing themselves to be caught napping."

"No, no, Mister Mayor," Gazee remarked, in conclusion, with a decided shake of the head.

"You kin climb this stranger all you like, but none of it in mine, thank you!"

"Gazee, if we don't silence this man or run him out of town, the chances are big, I think, that he will work our ruin."

"Now you have hit it, plumb center, I reckon!" the other exclaimed.

"I have been thinking just about this way for some time, and I reckon I will emigrate pretty soon."

"Oh, no; that move would be foolish until we secure the big stake for which we are playing."

"We have been to too much trouble to give up now, right on the eve of victory," the mayor urged.

"Yes, that is all right, if this fellow don't manage to come in and upset things."

"We must keep our eyes open."

As will be seen by this conversation, neither the Mayor nor Marshal of Blazing Star bore the Lone Hand any good will.

Around go the wheels of old Father Time's chariot, the hours come and go, regardless of human hopes or human fears.

Two weeks had elapsed since the day on which the "shooting match" between General Oglethorpe and the Lone Hand took place, but during that time, as far as could be seen on the surface, no important move had been made in the game by either side.

The Georgian had recovered sufficiently from his wound to be able to sit up, but was not in a condition to attend to any business.

He could give evidence, though, and so, by his directions, a couple of lawyers had been engaged who resided in the next county, and they were particularly warned that when they came to Richmond they must be on the lookout for a tall, good-looking stranger, in a blanket-coat, who would be apt to endeavor to pick a quarrel with them.

And now transport we the reader once again to the county seat, Richmond, and introduce him to Judge Labodot's sanctum sanctorum.

It was night, and the judge sat, writing, at his desk.

A single candle in a small, old-fashioned brass candlestick afforded light.

Since the unceremonious visit which the judge had received from the outlaws the lawyer had taken the precaution to place a couple of stout bars upon his two doors, so that it would be impossible for any marauders to gain an easy access.

But as it was early in the evening, only about half-past nine, the judge had not taken the precaution to put up his bars.

And so the lawyer was surprised again, this time by a single man, though—the chief of the masked outlaws who had visited him on the previous occasion.

The intruder was dressed in exactly the same fashion as before.

He entered by the rear door with the noiseless tread of a cat, and the first intimation that Judge Labodot had of his presence was when the man, who approached him stealthily from the rear, cast a rope-noose over his head which, as it slipped down, bound his arms to his side, and, pressing the muzzle of a revolver against the back of his head, gave the warning that if he

uttered a single cry he would be killed on the spot.

"All right! I'll be quiet as a lamb," the judge remarked, accepting the situation with as much grace as possible.

Then the outlaw possessed himself of the judge's revolver and completed the binding of his arms, then wheeled the old lounge around so that he confronted him.

"Now, Judge Labodot, I will trouble you for that letter I wrote you from Blazing Star some time ago," the outlaw said.

"The letter?" exclaimed the old lawyer, as if he didn't understand.

"Yes, you know what I mean well enough, so don't attempt to pretend ignorance."

"I have been thinking over the matter, and I have come to the conclusion that you wrote to me for the purpose of getting me into a trap."

"I never had the least suspicion at the time, and so, like a fool, I answered you; but some little things have excited my suspicions, and I reckon that letter will be better in my possession than in yours, for it might lead to the discovery of who I am if it fell into other hands."

"Upon my word, I don't know exactly where it is now!" the judge declared.

"I didn't think it amounted to anything, and the odds are big that it is destroyed."

"Oh! no, it isn't. You know better than that. You have that letter put away safely somewhere, all ready to bring it out so as to worry me."

And then the eyes of the outlaw, roving around the room, fell upon the safe, which stood by the door in the partition, which separated the judge's office from his sleeping apartment.

"Aha! mebbe it is in this safe!"

"Perhaps it is; there's a lot of old letters there."

The outlaw took the candle from the table and knelt by the safe, the door of which was open.

"Oho, judge, you are pretty smart, but I reckon I'm going to win the stakes this time," he cried.

"Have you counted me in, for I'm playing a Lone Hand in this game?"

It was the Lone Hand himself who spoke, and he stood in the doorway, leaning on the safe and looked down at the ruffian, who started in an agony of fear.

The outlaw was taken completely by surprise. He had thrust his revolver into its holster, and was unprepared for fight.

And the moment he attempted to draw the weapon, the Lone Hand covered him with his pistol.

CHAPTER XL.

THE REVELATION OF THE MYSTERY.

"Don't attempt to draw your weapon, or I will save the hangman a job!" the Lone Hand warned.

But the desperado heeded not the words—knowing that he was in the toils, he was determined to attempt to escape, even at the hazard of his life.

The Lone Hand saw by the man's eyes that he meditated resistance, and though he could have killed him on the spot, yet he preferred not to do so, for he desired to take him alive.

Therefore, the moment he perceived the desperado intended to resist, the Lone Hand discharged his pistol, taking aim so that the bullet just grazed the outlaws cheek, but the muzzle was so near the face of the masked man, that the flash of the powder blinded him for the moment.

This was exactly what the man-hunter intended.

Taking advantage of the confusion of the other, with a well-directed blow of his powerful left fist, he stretched the outlaw upon the floor.

And then, as the man attempted to rise and lift the hammer of his revolver at the same time, the Lone Hand quickly shifted the revolver in his hand, and, grasping it by the barrel, dealt the masked man a terrific blow on the head.

This was a settler! The man sunk back with a groan into insensibility.

From his pocket the victor produced a pair of handcuffs, and proceeded to spring them on the outlaw's wrists, first taking care to remove the desperado's weapons.

Now that he had the outlaw secure, the newcomer turned his attention to the judge, whom he released from his bonds.

"Upon my word, you came in the nick of time!" the old lawyer exclaimed.

"Yes; my plan worked to perfection," the other replied.

"I knew you had a scheme, but you did not make me acquainted with the fact that I was to play a part in it," Judge Labodot remarked.

The Lone Hand laughed.

"Well, I was afraid that, as you were not an old performer and used to this sort of thing, you might get nervous and spoil the game."

"How the deuce did it happen that you managed to make your appearance at such a timely moment?"

"The scheme was all arranged—cut and dried—beforehand."

"Two days ago I caused the report to be cir-

culated around Blazing Star that detective officers, from Little Rock, were on their way here to ferret out the murderers of Colonel Dangerfield.

"That one of the desperadoes had addressed a letter to you, and that you were positive, from certain things about the letter, that you would be able to identify the writer."

"I see; a very clever plan," the old lawyer remarked.

"The report reached the scoundrel's ears—the man who wrote the letter—and he became alarmed, exactly as you intended he should."

"Yes, I felt satisfied that sooner or later some of the gang would visit you with the idea of getting the letter which threatened to be so dangerous, and since the time when I caused the report to be started, I have kept a close watch upon this house."

"And at last you have bagged your game!" the old lawyer exclaimed in delight.

"It is an important capture, too, for this is the chief of the band!"

"Well, that is lucky!"

By this time the outlaw began to manifest signs of recovering his senses.

"Have you any idea who he is?" asked the judge, with a curious gaze at the disguised man.

"Oh, yes, I think I can call him by name. I spotted him some time ago. The decoy letter which you wrote to Blazing Star afforded me a clew."

"I rather think you will be astonished, though."

And as he spoke, the Lone Hand approached the prisoner and removed his hat and mask, also the false hair and beard which he wore.

Mathew Richards, Mayor of Blazing Star, stood revealed.

Judge Labodot stared in amazement.

He had not expected any such disclosure.

Just at this moment Richards opened his eyes, then he sat up and looked around him; when his gaze fell upon the two, he turned pale, for he understood that at last he was detected.

He "weakened" only for a moment, though, and then made an attempt to brazen the matter out.

"Well, boys, you have kinder got the dead-wood on me this time. I went into this thing as a sort of a joke, just to see how badly I could scare the judge hyer, but I reckon the boot is on the other leg now."

"That game will not work, Richards," the Lone Hand replied. "I have got you dead to rights, and you are too old a criminal not to know what that means."

For a moment Richards was startled; he looked the Lone Hand keenly in the face, as if the thought had just come to him that the other might be an old acquaintance.

But from the expression upon his features it was plain that he was not able to locate him.

"What do you mean by being too old a criminal?" he cried, indignantly.

"I mean exactly what I say."

"You see, judge," continued the Lone Hand turning to the lawyer, "I got an idea from the bit of work that was performed in blowing open the safe, as well as the way the fellows contrived to get into your office at the time they paid you the midnight visit, that the leader of the band was no wild, western fellow, but some first-class eastern criminal."

"So I took pains to find out how long this man had been in this part of the country, and what he had stated in regard to his past life. When I got the thing down fine, I wrote to all the chiefs of police in the prominent Eastern cities, and asked if any noted criminal—a first-class cracksman had disappeared about fifteen years ago, without leaving any trace of where he had gone, and I gave a description of this man here, without his beard and long hair, which I imagined he wore as a disguise, for they would materially alter his appearance."

"As I expected I located my man."

"Fifteen years ago Shang Murphy, one of the most notorious cracksmen in New York, was wanted on a dozen different charges."

"He had been a burglar—a check-raiser, being one of the most expert penmen in the country, and in fact, had given a little of his attention to all the higher grades of crime."

"He had a wife, almost as noted a criminal as himself; the two quarreled, and, in a fit of anger, the woman was killed; then he fled and all trace of him was lost."

"And this man is Murphy?" Judge Labodot asked.

"He is."

"It is a lie! you can't prove it!" cried the denounced villain.

"Oh, yes, I can. You can understand now, judge, who led the band that murdered Colonel Dangerfield; he was on the scent of the gold which he supposed the colonel possessed."

"Murphy, when he fled from New York, went South and enlisted in the Confederate army, and from all I can hear, made a good soldier, for he rose to the grade of captain."

"His career in this section casts no discredit upon him, as far as I can learn, until he became the leader of this band."

"You can understand now, judge, where the

notes of Colonel Dangerfield came from, that are in the possession of this man."

"They are forgeries, of course!"

"Yes, and the marshal who swears to seeing the notes delivered is no doubt one of these outlaws."

"You can't prove what you say about the notes!" the criminal cried, defiantly.

"That remains to be seen," the Lone Hand answered.

"In a few hours I will be back in Blazing Star; then, a search of your premises will be in order, and you are a smarter man than I take you to be if you have not some traces of your work at home."

The prisoner started, and the Lone Hand saw that the shot had struck home.

"Inside of four and twenty hours I will have every member of your band!"

"Wildcat Jack and Big Black Bill I have already spotted, and Gazee is the other man who wore the red beard, I guess, and as Gazee is inclined to be a little weak-kneed the odds are big he will turn State's evidence."

The outlaw reflected for a moment; the speech was true; Gazee would be likely to weaken, and then, with the desire to make his own punishment as light as possible, the outlaw chief said he would reveal everything if his captor would do what he could for him.

And so the story of the crime came out.

Gazee was arrested, and he, too, turned traitor to his companions, told the secret of the swamp, so that the Lone Hand with a posse were able to capture the outlaws without the slightest trouble, and these two had more of the man about them than the others, for they scorned to betray the secrets of the gang, and their rage was great when they learned that that it was their companion's treachery which had brought them in to the net.

All four were tried and convicted, and all were hung with the exception of the leader, whose sentence was commuted to imprisonment for life.

But he did not long survive the companions whom he had betrayed, for in an attempt to break jail he was shot by the sentry and killed.

By the Lone Hand's direction a vigilant search was made among the ruins; he thought there must be some clew to the secret.

Near where the bones of the colonel had been found, a small safe key was discovered, for which no one could account, until Margaret innocently remarked:

"Perhaps it is the key of the safe that papa said he was going to rent somewhere in New York."

The secret was out.

Search was made, and in one of the Safe Deposit Companies in New York, Colonel Dangerfield's safe was found and it contained seventy thousand dollars worth of United States bonds.

"I have no claim, I was after gold," the Lone Hand dryly remarked. "It is Margaret Dangerfield's."

And this was the wedding present that the bride received from the Lone Hand.

THE END.

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